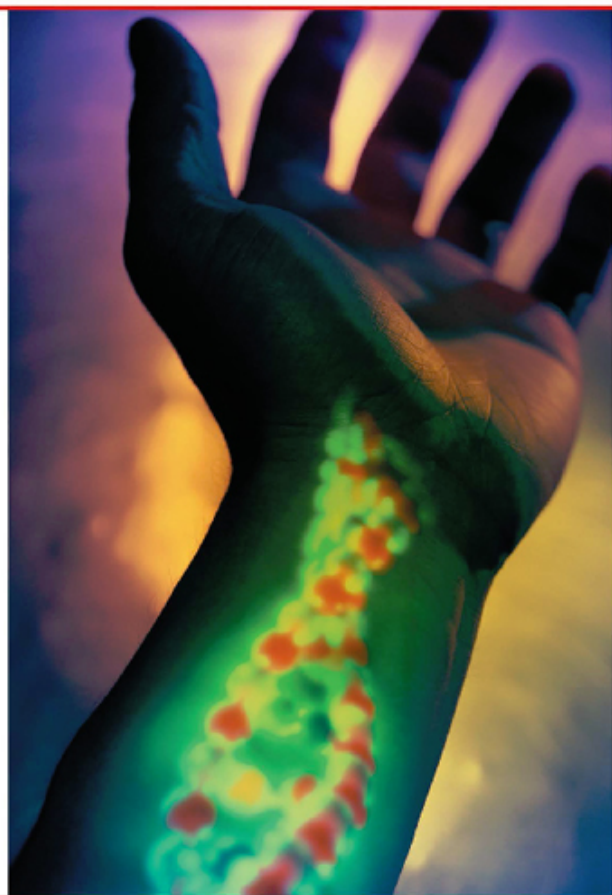


BRIGHT SEGMENT



Volume VIII: The Complete Stories of
THEODORE STURGEON



Theodore Sturgeon with his third wife, Marion Sturgeon. Halloween, 1961 or 1962, in the Streibel House, Woodstock, New York.

BRIGHT SEGMENT

Volume VIII:
The Complete Stories of
Theodore Sturgeon

Edited by
Paul Williams

Foreword by
William Tenn



North Atlantic Books
Berkeley, California

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EDITOR'S NOTE

THEODORE HAMILTON STURGEON was born February 26, 1918, and died May 8, 1985. This is the eighth of a series of volumes that will collect all of his short fiction of all types and all lengths shorter than a novel. The volumes and the stories within the volumes are organized chronologically by order of composition (insofar as it can be determined). This eighth volume contains stories written in 1953, 1954, and 1955. The last two (short-short) stories were written in 1946 and 1947, and are out of chronological sequence because copies of them have only recently been found.

Preparation of each of these volumes would not be possible without the hard work and invaluable participation of Noël Sturgeon, Debbie Notkin, and our publishers, Lindy Hough and Richard Grossinger. I would also like to thank, for their significant assistance with this volume, William F. Seabrook, Phil Klass, the Theodore Sturgeon Literary Trust, Marion Sturgeon, Jayne Williams, Ralph Vicinanza, Jennifer Privateer, Paula Morrison, Alan Bostick, Eric Weeks, Robin Sturgeon, Kim Charnovsky, Cindy Lee Berryhill, T. V. Reed, and all of you who have expressed your interest and support.

BOOKS BY THEODORE STURGEON

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More Than Human (1953)
E Pluribus Unicorn (1953)
Caviar (1955)
A Way Home (1955)
The King and Four Queens (1956)
I, Libertine (1956)
A Touch of Strange (1958)
The Cosmic Rape [aka *To Marry Medusa*] (1958)
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2. *Microcosmic God* (1995)
3. *Killdozer!* (1996)
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FOREWORD

Sturgeon, The Improbable Man

By Philip Klass (William Tenn)

I first met Ted Sturgeon in 1939 in an all-night cafeteria in New York City. The place was on West 57th Street between Eighth Avenue and Broadway, and around 2 A.M. served as a hangout for what might be called the midtown Bohemians. These were indigent writers and artists and actors and students, as well as many of the orators from Columbus Circle. The Circle, in its very close proximity to Central Park, was then pretty much the American version of the London's debaters' heaven, Hyde Park.

I met his slightly older brother, Peter, at the same time. I called Peter, who had just returned, utterly disillusioned and spent, from fighting on the Loyalist side in the Spanish Civil War, I called Peter "the real Sturgeon." I called Ted "the improbable Sturgeon," why I didn't know right then. But as I got to know him, I realized my original instinct had been exactly right.

My friend Rouben Samberg brought me over to meet him. Rouben was a very, very indigent painter who was just then about to give up the easel for the camera and was thereby to find enormous riches in advertising. He knew I was trying to write science fiction.

"Listen, Phil," he said, grabbing my arm and pointing me at a table in the rear of the cafeteria. "Your ambition is very clear and simple: You aspire to starve for art in the pulps. I want you to meet someone who's already made it. This is Ted Sturgeon, a successful, selling pulp writer. He's starving."

I shook hands with Ted and his brother, Peter, sitting beside him. Peter was thin and gloomy, prematurely slightly bald and slightly gray. Ted was thin and vibrant, with dancing eyes under a head of surprisingly curly hair.

Both of them had half-filled cups of coffee in front of them, cups which they raised to their mouths from time to time but from which they were careful not to drink. (The deal was simple: If you had some coffee left in the cup, you were still a customer who was finishing his meal and the management would not ask you to leave the steam-heated cafeteria and go outside into the ice and snow of 57th Street. Therefore I had carried my own half-filled cup of coffee over to the Sturgeon table, and—as I sat down—I carefully put it in front of me as a token of cafeteria respectability.)

While Peter spoke gloomily and bitterly of his experiences in Spain (he had gone there to fight the fascist Franco on behalf of the Spanish Republic, had become a POUMist, and therefore had been treated with careful viciousness by the Stalinist-dominated Loyalists), Ted lifted the neck of a nonexistent guitar with his left hand and began fingering its chords. After a while, he picked up an imaginary pick with the other hand and carefully and intently played the imaginary guitar. And then, as Peter spoke of specific battles and intricate left-wing Spanish politics, Ted, still strumming the imaginary guitar, began singing in a very low voice, providing an unmistakable musical background to Peter's what-should-I-call-it?—to Peter's *documentary*.

He sang "Los Cuatros Generales," the original Spanish version of a song much sung in those days by intellectuals who saw themselves as on the side of the hard-pressed Loyalist government of Spain, the government fighting for its very existence against Francisco Franco and the powers of fascism. I had only heard it up to then in its English version, "The Four Insurgent Generals."

When Ted had finished singing—still in a very, very low voice, for why irritate the management or the busboys of the cafeteria?—and Peter had paused in his tale of a bloody night along the Ebro, I asked Ted with a bit of a chuckle why he didn't get himself a real guitar.

"I have a real guitar," he said. "But it's in hock right now. If Campbell buys my new story for *Unknown*, I'll get it out. Then you must come and visit me, and I'll play for you."

He phoned me two weeks later and told me the story had sold. He gave me his address and asked me to come to his furnished room that evening. By then I had read his first sale to *Astounding*, "Ether Breather," and not thought too much of it. But I was

terribly impressed with the fact that he was truly a published writer, and, above all, a published writer in my favorite magazine, Street & Smith's *Astounding*.

He played a lot of wonderful stuff for me, but I'm afraid I was a wee bit snotty about his performance. After all, I told myself, I had recently heard both Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie in the same room, taking turns: Leadbelly on his twelve-string guitar, playing his own "It's a Bourgeois Town"; Guthrie in his cowboy hat, playing his own "Talking Dust Bowl."

This, of course, was years before Sturgeon came back from a disastrous couple of years in the tropics with a quiverful of wonderful songs which I and others would beg him to play again and again at parties and science fiction conventions.

One of the songs he played that night, as cockroaches marched up and down the walls of his furnished room, was something he had written to a girl he'd just met, celebrating in verse after verse her "*deux yeux si bleu*." Then he played her reply, a delightful little piece in which she thanked him for the song but mused over the cruel *dommage* that her eyes were "*brun pas bleu*."

Very definitely the improbable Sturgeon, I thought.

No, back then I was not all that impressed with Sturgeon as a guitarist, but when it came to sheer writing, it was a totally different matter.

He showed me manuscripts on which he was working for John Campbell's *Unknown*, the sister magazine of *Astounding*.

He showed me early versions and first drafts of "Shottle Bop" and "Yesterday Was Monday" and "It." I read them and grew more and more impressed.

He told me what he had been living on before selling work to Campbell and after having been beached as a seaman: short-short stories to the McClure daily newspaper syndicate for which the pay was five dollars (*five dollars!*) ... on publication. (True, money went a lot farther then, but after he had paid his room rent of four dollars a week, indeed there was not very far at all left to go.)

Then he asked me what kind of ideas I had been trying to develop into science fiction or fantasy stories. He listened, and broke my plots down into their constituent elements, discussing them first in terms of craft, then in terms of art. "You must always begin with craft," he cautioned, "but you must always

move to art. Else why bother?"

It is no overstatement to say that my lips were dry with awe by the time I left.

Then there were three and a half years of war for me, and marriage and a family and a stint in construction work in the tropics for Ted. We lost touch with each other until I read a published letter by him that gave his current address on Eighth Avenue in Manhattan. By that time I had read his "Killdozer," and—to me, even more important—his "Microcosmic God." I looked him up, determined not to show the enormous admiration which I was beginning to feel for him as a writer.

He was delighted to learn that I had just sold my first story to John Campbell. He read the manuscript in carbon, approved it (which even then I felt was too nice of him), and asked what I was working on. I showed him my latest and as yet unsold story, "Child's Play."

"It's good, Phil," he said. "Quite good. Listen, I'm also operating as a literary agent these days. Would you like me to represent you?"

I told him I could think of nothing I'd like more. And so I became his client, along with other struggling unknowns like James Blish, and Damon Knight, and Judith Merrill.

He was a very good agent, selling each of us to many more markets than we'd ever have thought of for ourselves.

But more important, far more important than his agenting were his critiques. The hours he spent discussing a character, a plot twist, a goddam single sentence! I never had an agent like that afterwards, and I've had many, ranging from quite poor to moderately superb. Ted, Ted was pure gold.

He was a most rare, most improbable combination. He was a true artist and poet who had an extraordinary amount of market savvy, unsurpassed in any commercial writer or literary agent I've encountered since. Except for a very brief period in his life when he wrote directly and only for John Campbell of *Astounding*, he was incapable of doing more than five consecutive sentences that were not literature—yet he was almost indecently proud of the medium, pulp science fiction, in which he worked and the statements which he felt only it could make.

When he asked Ray Bradbury to write an introduction to his first collection of short stories, *Without Sorcery*, and Bradbury

came up with a piece praising Sturgeon's work, but full of apologies about the cheapness and absurdity of most science fiction, Ted sent the intro back together with a letter that must have taken at least a quarter of an inch of skin off the full length of Bradbury's body. This letter, please remember, was to a contemporary whose work Ted respected more than anyone else's in the science fiction of that period. Bradbury returned a totally new introduction (note that in the publishing economy of that day, he correctly had no expectation of being paid a thin dime for either piece!) along with a beautifully written *mea culpa*. One of the word-pictures Bradbury painted in that second introduction was a view of Ted Sturgeon banging away at his typewriter as he sat under a gigantic toadstool around which other, nontyping, elves and various strange small creatures were romping merrily.

(And surely I will be pardoned for pointing out that today, individual hardbound copies of *Without Sorcery* bring many times more dollars than Ted got for his total advance *and* all his royalties on the book.)

All this, of course, was before Ted gave up his rather sizable agency, presenting it to Scott Meredith for nothing but zilch and good will. He always tended to be at his most improbable where his own finances were concerned. It was before the brief spell that he worked at a huge salary in the *Time-Life* publications circulation division, where he left behind him dozens of hilarious, coruscating anecdotes about his tenure and his contributions. And it was before ...

It was before he at last found a comfortable literary home in Horace Gold's *Galaxy* and Tony Boucher's *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*—thus, before he was able to write stories that pleased him completely (“The [Widget], the [Wadget] and Boff,” for example) and that he felt were utterly his all the way through; it was before the novels like *More Than Human* and *The Dreaming Jewels*, where he could roam freely through his improbable mind and flex his improbable literary muscles.

And it was before—speaking of unlikely, improbable beauty—it was before he met and married Marion and had his second set of offspring, the first three of which were Robin, Tandy, and Noël (my wife, Fruma, when asked at that time about his children, used to reply, “He has one of each”).

It was also long, long before I broke up with a woman after a

two-year relationship, and left my low-rent-despite-the-housing-shortage apartment to her, as a gentleman should. And Ted, hearing of this and knowing that I had barely the price of a single day's hotel room in my pocket, insisted on turning over his just-acquired and newly decorated East Village flat to me. ("But Ted, where will you sleep?" "Oh, I have friends. Here and there.")

Also, and finally, it was before we quarreled—over some inconsequential matter like politics or life and death—and didn't see each other for far, far too many years.

My improbable friend, Theodore Hamilton Sturgeon, died in 1985. We, the world, were left with nothing but genuine probability and damn grim reality.

It is so much less than we had had.

Cactus Dance

THE BOOK, THEY DECIDED, would bring Fortley Grantham back East if nothing else would, and at first I'd agreed with them. Later, I didn't know. Later still, I hardly cared, for it grew heavy in my pack. Once, somewhere in the desert between Picacho and Vekol, two prospectors found me squatted on the scorching sand, heat-mad, dreaming out loud. It wouldn't do for them to explain to me about the puncture in my canteen; I insisted that the book had soaked up my water as I walked, and I could get it back by wringing it out. I still have the book, and on it still are my tooth-marks.

By train and stage and horse and mule I went, and, when I had to, on foot. I cursed the Territories in general and Arizona in particular. I cursed Prescott and Phoenix and Maricopa; Sacaton on the Gila River Reservation and Snowflake on Silver Creek. At Brownell in the Quijotas I learned that William Howard Taft had signed the enabling act that would make a state of that hellish country, and thereafter I cursed him too. From time to time I even cursed myself and the stubborn streak which ran counter to comfort and career and intelligence itself—it would have been so simple, so wise, to go back to the green lawns of the Institute, the tinkle of teacups, to soft polite laughter and the coolth of ivied libraries.

But most of all, far and away most of all, from his books to his beard, from his scalp to his scholarship, I cursed Fortley Grantham who had leapt from the altitude of the Pudley Chair in Botany into this dehydrated wilderness. He could have died under the wheels of a brewery-dray, and I'd have wept and honored him. He might have risen to be Dean, perhaps even to Chairman. Failing these things, if he felt he must immolate himself in this special pocket of Hell, why, *why* could he not resign?

But no, not Fortley Grantham. He simply stayed out west, drifting, faintly radiating rumors that he was alive. If mail ever reached him, he never answered it. If he intended to return, he informed no one. He would not come back, he would not be

decently dead, he would not resign.

And I wanted that Chair. I had worked for it. I had earned it. What was I to do—wait for some sort of Enoch Arden divorce between Grantham and the Chair, so that he would be legally dead and the Chair legally vacant? No, I must find him or his grave, bring him back or prove him dead.

His last letter had come from Silver King, and at Silver King they told me he'd gone to Florence. He had not, and I was tired and sick when I got there to learn that. A Mohave up from Arizola had seen him, though, and from there the trail led along the Union Pacific to Red Rock and then to the railhead at Silverbell.

Had it not been for a man of the cloth at Silverbell, a Reverend Sightly, I'd have lost the trail altogether. But the good man told me, with horror in his voice, of the orgies indulged in by the local Indians, who sat in a ring around a fire gobbling mescal buttons and having visions. I took the trouble to correct the fellow as to the source of the narcotic, which comes from the peyotl and not from the mescal at all, whereupon he grew positively angry with me—not, as I first supposed, because I had found him in error, but because he took me to be “that unholy scoundrel who has brought the gifts of science to aid and abet the ignorant savage in his degraded viciousness.” When at last I convinced him of the innocence of my presence and person, he apologized and explained to me that a renegade botanist was loose in the desert, finding the rare and fabled peyotl with unheard-of accuracy, and trading the beastly stuff to whomever wanted it.

From that point on the trail was long and winding, but at least it was clear. When I could, I enquired after Grantham, and when no one had heard of Grantham I had merely to ask about the problem of obtaining mescal buttons. Always there were stories of the white man who was not a prospector nor a miner nor a drummer nor anything else but the purveyor of peyotl. He was a tall, broad man with a red-and-silver beard and a way of cocking his head to one side a bit when he spoke. He was Grantham, all right—may the vultures gulp his eyeballs and die of it.

Between the Eagle Tails and Castle Dome is the head of Posas Valley, and at its head is a filthy little oasis called Kofa. I confess I was happy to see it. It was August, and the heat and the glare had put knobs like knuckles in my sinus tissues; I could feel them

grind together as I breathed.

I was afoot, the spavined nag I had bought in Arlington having died in New Water Pass. I had a burro for my pack and gear, and it was all she could handle. She was old and purblind, and if she had left her strength and durability behind with her youth, she had at least left her stubbornness too. She carried the little she could and let me walk.

I could hardly have been more depressed. I had little money left, and less hope. My canteen was a quarter-full of tepid mud which smelled faintly of the dead horned toad I'd seen in the waterhole in the pass. My feet hurt and my hipjoints creaked audibly as I plodded along. Half silently I mumbled what I once facetiously had called my "Anthem for Grantham," a sort of chant which ran:

... I shall people his classroom with morons. I shall have him seduced by his chambermaid and I shall report it to the Dean. I shall publicly refute his contention that the Echinopsis cacti are separate from the genus Cereus. I shall lock him in his rooms at banquet time on Founder's Day. I shall uproot his windowboxes and spread rumors about him with the Alumni Association ...

It was the only way I had left of cheering myself up.

For weeks now I had trailed the rumors of Grantham's peyotl traffic farther and farther from peyotl grounds. It was saguaro country here, and all about they stretched their yearning, otherworldly arms out and upward, as if in search for a lover who might forget their thorns. Down the valley, westward, was a veritable forest of Dracenoideae, called yucca hereabouts. I did not know if yucca and peyotl could coexist, and I thought not. If not, my main method of trailing Grantham was lost.

In such hopeless depression I staggered into Kofa, which, primitive as it was, afforded a chance of better company than my black thoughts and a doddering burro. I knew better than to hope for a restaurant and so went to the sole source of refreshment, the bar.

It seemed so dark inside, after the merciless radiance outside, that I stood blinking like an owl for thirty seconds before I could orient myself. At last I could locate the bar and deduce that a man stood behind it.

I croaked out an order for a glass of milk, which the bartender greeted with a thundering laugh and the quotation of a price so

fantastic that I was forced to order whiskey, which I despise. The fool's nostrils spread when I demanded water with the whiskey, but he said nothing as he poured it from a stone jar.

I took the two glasses as far back in that 'dobe cavern as I could get from him, and slumped down into a chair. For a long moment there was nothing in my universe but the feel of my lips in the water, which, though alkaline, was wet and cool.

Only then, leaning back and breathing deeply, did I realize that someone sat across the table from me. He cocked his head on one side and said, "Well, well! If Mahomet won't come to the mountain, the Institute brings forth a mouse."

"Dr. *Grantham!*"

He watched me for a moment and then laughed. It was the same laugh, the deep rumble, the flash of strong white teeth which I used to envy so much. His eyes opened after it and he leaned forward. "Better shut your mouth now, sonny."

I had not realized it was open. I shut it and felt it with my fingers while I looked at him. He was in worn Levi's and a faded shirt to which had been sewn four or five extra pockets and a sort of shoulder cape with its lower edge cut into a fringe in the buckskin style. His hair and beard were untrimmed. His hands seemed stiff with yellowish calluses in the palms, and they were indifferently clean. A broad strap hung over one shoulder and across his chest to support a large leather pouch. He was a far cry from Fortley Grantham, M.A., F.B.S., D.Sc., with lifetime tenure of the Pudley Chair in Botany at the Institute; yet there was no mistaking him.

"Big Horn!" he roared to the bartender. "Set 'em up here. This here's a perfessor from back East an' we're goin' to have a faculty meetin'." That's how he pronounced it—"perfessor." He dealt me a stunning thump on the left biceps. "Right, Chip?"

"Chip?" I looked behind me; there was no one there. And the bartender's name obviously was Big Horn. It penetrated that he was calling *me* Chip. "You surely haven't forgotten my name, Doctor."

"I surely ain't, Doctor," he said mimicking my voice. He smiled engagingly. "Everybody's got two names," he explained, "the name they's born with an' the name I think they ought to have. The name you ought to have, now, it's Chip. There's a little crittur lives in an' out of the rocks, sits up straight an' looks

surprised, holds up its two little paws, an' lets its front teeth hang out. Chipmunk, they call it back East, though it's a rock squirrel other places. Get me, Chip?"

I put both hands on the table and pressed my lips together. Big Horn arrived just then and put more whiskey down before me. I said coldly, "No, thank you." Big Horn paid absolutely no attention to me, but walked away leaving the whiskey where it was.

"Come on, climb down. This ain't the hallowed halls."

"That is the one thing I'm sure of," I said haughtily.

He shook his head in pity. He looked down at his glass and his eyebrows twitched. He made no attempt to say anything and I began to feel that perhaps I, not he, should be making the overtures. I said, for want of anything better, "I suppose 'Big Horn' is another of your appellations."

He nodded. "To him it's a sort of compliment." He laughed. "Some people carry their vanity in the damndest places."

I felt I should not pursue this, somehow. He tilted his head and said, "You're not jumpin' salty because I call you Chip?"

"I don't read a compliment into it."

"Shucks, now, son—they're real purty little animals!" He waved. "Drink up now, an' warm yoreself. I'm not insultin' you. You wouldn't be wonderin' about it if I did—I'd see to that. Don't you understand, I was callin' you Chip—privately, I mean—from the minute I saw you, years back."

"I was beginning to think," I said acidly, "that you had forgotten everything that happened before you came to Arizona."

"Never fear, colleague," he intoned in precisely the voice that once boomed through the lecture halls. "I can still distinguish a rhizome from a tuber and a faculty tea from deep hypnosis." Instantly he reverted to this appalling new self. "I got a handle too. They call me Buttons."

"To what characteristic is that attributed?"

He looked at me admiringly. "I druther listen to that kind of talk than a thirsty muleskinner cussin'." He pulled at the thongs that tied down the flap of his pouch, reached in, and tossed a handful of what seemed to be small desiccated mushrooms to me.

I picked one up, squeezed it, turned it over, smelled it. "Lophophora."

"Good boy," he said sincerely. "Know which one?"

“Williamsii, I think.”

“Sharp as a sidewinder’s front fang,” he said, giving me another of those buffets. “Hereabouts they’re mescal buttons.”

“Oh,” I said. “Oh yes. So they call you Buttons. You—uh—are rather widely known in connection with this—uh—vegetable.”

He laughed. “I didn’t think a botanist ever used the word ‘vegetable.’ ”

I ignored this. I rose. “One moment, please. I think I can show you that you have a wider reputation in this matter than you realize.”

He made as if to stop me but did not. I went out to my burro. She was standing like a stone statue in the blazing sun, her upper lip just touching the surface of the water in the horse-trough, breathing water-vapor in patient ecstasy. I dug into my pack and wormed out the book. Inside again, I placed it carefully by Grantham’s glass.

He looked at it, at me, then picked it up. Holding it high, he moved his head back and his chin in with the gesture of a seaman forcing his horizoned eyes to help with threading a needle.

“Journal of the Botanical Sciences,” he read. “Catalogue, Volume Four, revised. 1910, huh? Right up to the minute. Oh bully.” He squinted. “Cactaceae. Phyla and genera reclassified. Hey, Big Horn,” he roared, “the perfessor here’s got reclassified genera.”

The bartender clucked sympathetically. Grantham leafed rapidly. “Nice. Nice.”

“We thought you’d like it. Look up lophophora.”

He did. Suddenly he grunted as if I had kneed him, and stabbed a horny forefinger onto the page. “‘*Lophophora granthamii*’ I’ll be Billy-be-damned! So they took note of old Grantham, did they?”

“They did. As I said, you are widely known in connection with peyotl.”

He chuckled. He made no attempt to hide the fact that he was vastly pleased.

“When you were sending back specimens and reports, you were of great value to us,” I pointed out. I coughed. “Something seems—ah—to have happened.”

He kept his eyes on the listing, wagging his big head delightedly. “Yup, yup,” he said. “Something happened.” He

suddenly snapped the book closed and slid it across to me. "Last thing in the world I ever expected to see again."

"I didn't think you would, either," I said bitterly. "Dr. Grantham—"

"Buttons," he corrected.

"Dr. Grantham, I have traveled across this continent and through some of the most Godforsaken topography on Earth just to put this volume in your hands."

He started. I think that he realized only then that I had sought him out, that this was no accident on a field trip.

"You didn't!" He lifted his glass and tossed it to his lips, found it empty, looked around in a brief confusion, then reached and took mine. He wiped his mouth with the bristly back of his hand. "What in hell *for*?"

I tapped the book. "If I may speak frankly—"

"Fire away."

"We felt that this might—uh—bring you back to your senses."

"I got real healthy senses."

"Dr. Grantham, you don't understand. You—you—" I floundered, picked up my second whiskey and drank some of it. It made my eyes stream. My throat made a sort of death-rattle and suddenly I could breathe again. I could feel the whiskey sinking a tap-root down my esophagus while tendrils raced up and out to my earlobes where, budding, they began to heat.

"You left for a field trip and did not return. You were granted your sabbatical year to cover this because of your prominence in the field and because of the excellence of the collections you sent back; specimens such as the peyotl now named for you. Then the specimens dwindled and ceased, the reports dwindled and ceased—and then nothing, nothing at all."

He scratched his thick pelt of red-and-silver. "Reckon I just figured it didn't matter much no more."

"Didn't matter?" I realized I squeaked, and then that my voice was high and nagging, but I no longer cared. "Don't you realize that as long as you are alive you hold the Pudley Chair?"

I saw the glint in his eye and clutched his wrist. "If you shout out to that bartender that you have a Pudley Chair, I'll—I'll—" I whispered, but could not finish for the cannonade of rich laughter he sent up. I sat tense and furious, helpless to do or say anything until he finished. At last he wiped his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely, quite as if he were civilized. "You caught me off guard. I'm really sorry, Professor."

"It's all right," I lied. "Doctor, I want that Chair if you don't. I've worked hard for it. I've earned it. I—I *need* it."

"Well gosh, son, go to it. It's all yours."

I had wanted to hear that for so long, I'd dreamed of it so much—and now, hearing it, I became furiously angry. "Why didn't you resign?" I shouted. "That's all you had to do, resign, put a two-cent stamp on an envelope, save me all this work, this worry—I nearly died with a hole in my canteen," I wept, waving at the pottery kiln they call "outdoors" in this terrible land. "Two horses I killed, my work is waiting, my books, students—"

I found myself patting the table inarticulately, glaring into his astonished eyes. "Why?" I yelled. "Why, why, why—" I moaned.

He got up and came round the table and stood behind me. On my shoulders he put two huge warm hands like epaulets. "I didn't know, son. I—damn it, I did know, I guess." I hated myself for it, but my shoulders shook suddenly. He squeezed them. "I did know. I reckon I just didn't care."

He took his hands away and went back to his chair. He must have made a sign because Big Horn came back with more whiskey.

After a time I said, with difficulty, "All the way out here I hated you, understand that? I'm not—I don't—I mean, I never hated anything before, I lived with books and people who talk quietly and—and scholastic honors ... Damn it, Dr. Grantham, I admired and respected you, you understand? If you'd stayed at the Institute for the next fifty years, then for fifty years I'd've been happy with it. I admired the Chair and the man who was in it, things were the way they should be. Well, if you didn't want to stay, good. If you didn't want the Chair, good. But if you care so little about it—and I respect your judgment—you understand?"

"Oh gosh yes. Shut up awhile. Drink some whiskey. You're going to bust yourself up again."

We sat quietly for a time. At length he said, "I didn't care. I admit it. Not for the Institute nor the Chair nor you. I should've cared about you, or anyone else who wanted it as bad as you do. I'm sorry. I'm real sorry. I got—involved. Other things came to be important."

"Peyotl. Selling drugs to the Indians," I snarled. "You've

probably got a nice little heap of dust salted away!"

The most extraordinary series of expressions chased each other across his face. I think if the first one—blind fury—had stayed, I'd have been dead in the next twelve seconds.

"I don't have any money," he said gently. "Just enough for a stake every once in a while, so I can—" He stared out at the yellow-white glare. Then, as if he had not left an unfinished sentence, he murmured, "Peyotl. Professor, you know better than to equate these buttons with opium and hashish. Listen, right near here, in the seventeenth century, there used to be a mission called Santo de Jesús Peyotes. Sort of looks as if the Spanish priests thought pretty well of it, hm? Listen," he said urgently, "Uncle Sam brought suit against an Indian by the name of Nahqua-tah-tuck, because Uncle's mails had been used to ship peyotl around. When the defense witnesses were through testifying about how peyotl-eaters quit drinking, went back to their wives, and began to work hard; when a sky pilot name of Prescott testified about his weekly services where he served the stuff to his parish, and they were the most God-fearing parish in the Territories, why, Uncle Sam just packed up and went right back home."

I knew something of the forensics of the alkaloid mescaline. I said, "Well and good, but you haven't told me how you—how you could—"

"Easy, ea—sy," he soothed, and just in time too. "Chip, you're the injured party, for sure. I wish I could—well, make up for it, part way."

"Perhaps we'd just better not talk about it."

"No, wait." He studied me. "Chip, I'm going to tell you about it. I'm going to tell you how a man like me could do what he's done, how he could find something more important than all the Institutes running. But—"

I waited.

"—I don't expect you to believe it. Want to hear it anyway? It's the truth."

I thought about it. If I left him now, the Chair waiting for me, my personal and academic futures assured—wouldn't that content me?

It wouldn't, I answered myself. Because Grantham wouldn't return or resign. I'd lost two years, almost. I should know why I'd

lost them. I *had* to know. I'd lost them because Grantham was callous and didn't care; or because Grantham was crazy; or because of something much bigger "than all the Institutes running." Which?

"Tell me, then."

He hesitated, then rose. "I will." He thumped his chest, and it sounded like the grumble you hear sometimes after heat lightning. "But I'll tell it my way. Come on."

"Where?"

He tossed a thumb toward the west. "The forest."

The "forest" was the heavy growth of *Draconaenoideae* I'd seen down in the valley. It was quite a haul and I was still tired, but I got up anyway. Grantham gave me an approving look. He went outside and unstrapped my pack from the burro. "We'll let Big Horn hold this." He took it inside and emerged a moment later.

"Why don't you leave your pouch?"

Grantham twinkled. "They call me Buttons, remember? I never leave this anywhere."

We walked for nearly an hour in silence. The yucca appeared along the trail in ones and twos, then in clusters and clumps with spaces between. Their presence seemed to affect Grantham in some way. He began to walk with his head up, instead of fixing his eyes on the path, and his mind God knows where.

"See there?" he said once. He pointed to what was left of a shack, weed-grown and ruined. I nodded but he had nothing more to offer.

A little later, as we passed a fine specimen of melocactus, the spiny "barrel," Grantham murmured, "It's easy to fall under the spell of the cacti. You know. It caught you a thousand miles away from here. Ever smell the cereus blooming at night, Chip? Ever wonder what makes the Turk's-head wear a fez? Why can't a chinch-bug make cochineal out of anything but nopal? And why the spines, why? When most of 'em would be safe from everyone and everything even sliced up with gravy on ..."

I answered none of his questions, because at first I thought them foolish. I thought, it's like asking why hair grows on a cat's back but not on its nose—then gradually I began to yield, partly because it seemed after all that a cactus is indeed a stranger thing than a cat—or a human, for that matter; and partly because it was Grantham, *the* Grantham, who murmured these things.

"This will do," he said suddenly, and stopped.

The trail had widened and then disappeared, to continue three hundred yards down the valley where again the yucca grew heavily. Flash floods had cut away the earth to leave an irregular sandy shelf on the north side, and Grantham swung up on this and squatted on his heels. I followed slowly and sat beside him.

He bowed his head and pressed his heavy eyebrow ridges against his knees, hugging his legs hard. He radiated tension, and, just as noticeably, the tension went away. He raised his head slowly and looked off down the valley. I followed his gaze. The bald hills were touched to gold by the dropping sun, and their convoluted shadows were a purple that was black, or a black that was purple. Grantham began to talk.

"Back there. That shack."

He paused. I recalled it.

He said, "Used to be a family there. Mexican. Miguel, face as hard and bald as those hills, and a great fat wife like a suet pudding with a toupee. Inside Miguel was soft and useless and cruel the way only lazy people can be cruel. And the wife was hickory with thorns, inside, with another kind of cruelty. Miguel would never go out of his way to be kind. The woman would travel miles, work days on end, to be cruel.

"Kids."

Somewhere a lizard scuffled, somewhere a gopher sent the letter B in rapid, expert Morse. I held two fingers together, and with one eye closed used the fingers to cover the sun limb to limb. When the lower limb peeped under my finger, Grantham's breath hissed in and out quickly, once each, and he said, "They had kids. Two or three pigeon-breasted toddlers. One other. But I met her later.

"That was when I first came, when I was doing that collecting and reporting that impressed you all so much. I arranged with Miguel the same deal I had with others before: he was to keep his eyes open for this plant or that, or an unseasonal flower; and certain kinds he was to cut and save for me, and others he was to locate and lead me to. He'd get a copper or two for what I liked, and once in a while a dime just to keep 'em going. Quite a trick when no one speaks the other's language and the signs you make mean different things all around. Still, the law of averages figures here, too, and I always got my money's worth.

"I made my deal and he called in the family, all but one, and when all the heads were nodding and the jabbering stopped, I waved my hand and headed this way. Miguel shouted something at me a moment later, and I turned and saw them all clustered together looking at me bug-eyed, but I didn't know what he meant, so I just waved and walked on. They didn't wave back.

"I'd about reached where we're sitting now when I heard a sort of growl up ahead. I'd been looking at the flora all the way up, and never noticed the things I'd smell or hear or just—just *feel* now. Anyway, I looked up and the first thing I saw was a little girl standing here in the cut. The second thing was a black roiling wall of water and cloud towering up and over me, coming down like a dynamited wall. The third thing was a gout of white spray thirty feet tall squirting out of the landscape not a quarter of a mile away.

"How long does it take to figure things out at a time like that? It was like standing still for forty minutes, thinking it out laboriously, and at the same time being able to move only two feet a minute like a slow loris. Actually I suppose I looked up, then jumped, but a whole lot happened in that second.

"I shouted and was beside the girl in two steps. She didn't move. She was looking at the sky and the spume with the largest, darkest eyes I have ever seen. She was a thin little thing like the rest of Miguel's litter. She was by no means pretty; her face was badly pocked and either she'd lost a front tooth or so or the second set had never made up its mind to go on with the job.

"Thing is, she was a native and I wasn't. To me the flash flood was a danger, but she was completely unafraid. It wasn't a stupid calm. If ever there was a package of sensitivity, this was it. How can I describe it? Look, you know how a beloved house-cat watches you enter a room? The paws are turned under, the eyes are one-third open, and the purr goes on and on like a huge and sleepy bee. The cat can do that because it means no violence to you and you mean no violence to it.

"Now imagine coming suddenly on a wild deer—how would you feel if it looked up at you with just such fearlessness? It was as if violence couldn't occur near this girl. It was unthinkable. Before her was this hellish wall of water and beside her a rather large bearded stranger shouting like a rag-peddler, and there she stood, awake, aware, not stunned, not afraid.

"I scooped her up and made for the bank. I—I had help. I thought at the time it was the vanguard of that tall press of wind. Later I thought—I don't know what I thought, but anyway, the yuccas folded toward me, tangling their leathery swords together; even at their tips I had something thick as your arm and strong as an anchor-cable to take hold of. I swung up past one, two, three of them that way and then the williwaw came down shouting and knocked me flat as a domino.

"I twisted as I fell so I wouldn't land on the child. I held her tight to me with my right arm, and I threw up my left as some sort of guard over both of us. I distinctly saw a forty-foot Chaya cactus twist past overhead, and then I was hit. By what, I couldn't say, but it hit my left forearm and my left fist came down on my chin, and that, for me, was the end of that part of the adventure.

"When I opened my eyes I thought first I'd gone blind, and then it came to me that it was night, a black, scudding night, cold the way only this crazy either-or-and-all-the-way country can get. I was shaking like a gravel-sorter. Something had hold of my arm, which hurt, and I tried to pull it away and couldn't.

"It was the kid. She was crouched beside me, holding my left forearm in both her hands. She wasn't shivering. Her hands were warm, too, though I suppose anything over forty degrees would feel warm just then. I stopped pulling and heaved up to see what I could see. The scud parted and let a sick flicker of moon show through, and that helped.

"I had a five-inch gash in my arm—up and down, fortunately, not across, so it had missed any major blood-vessel. I could see the two ends of the cut, but between those ends lay the girl's hands. Their pressure was firm and unwavering, and clotted blood had cemented her to me nice as you please. And she'd been sitting there holding the edges of the cut together—how long? Three hours? Four, five? I didn't know. I don't know now.

"She tugged at me gently and we got our feet under us. We scrabbled down the bank until I could see the deep, strong creek that hadn't been there that afternoon. We went downstream a piece until the bank shelved, squatted by the edge, and got her hands and my arm together into the water. In a few moments she worked a hand free, then the other. I bled a bit then, but not too much, and she helped me tie on my kerchief.

"I sat down, partly to rest, mostly to look at her. She looked

right back, with that same fearlessness showing even in the scudding dark. I thanked her but she didn't say anything. I grinned at her but she didn't smile. She just looked at me, not appraising, not defiant, just liking what she saw, and unafraid.

"I took her back to Miguel's. The old lady was raising particular hell, shaking her fists at the sky. Their rotten corral-pole was down and they'd lost two head of their hairy, bony, bot-ridden scrub cattle. I got a vague impression of two of the little ones staring big-eyed and scared from the drafty corner. I propelled the girl forward to the doorway and the old sow put out a claw and snatched her inside. I thought she raised her fist but I wasn't ready to believe anything like that. Not that night. Then the door was closed and I slogged off toward Kofa.

"About ten minutes later I saw her again, standing by the bank just out of the shadows of the yucca. If the moon hadn't flashed I'd have missed her altogether. She faded back into the shadows and when I reached the place she was gone, though I yelled my head off. I do believe she had come to see for sure if I could navigate all right. How she got clear of the house and passed me in the dark is another thing I'll never know.

"It was a couple of days before I could get around easily with that arm. It was badly bruised and it swelled like a goatskin bottle, but the cut healed faster than a cut like that ought to. Call it clean air and good constitution, if you like. Got any makings?"

"I don't smoke," I said.

"That's right." He sighed. "No matter.

"Well, a couple of days later I went back. Miguel had quite a pile of stuff for me. Good stuff, too, a lot of it. A colchicum, or what looked like one, but without the bulging 'corm' at the base; a gloriosa with, by God, pink petals; a Chaya only eight inches tall. Lot of junk, too, of course, and maybe more treasures—I wouldn't know. I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye—and there, just off Miguel's reservation, the girl stood in the shadows.

"*Herf!*" he snorted, "once in the West Indies I cut into a jungle glade and saw a wild magnolia as big as my head. It was so big, so pale in the dimness that I was actually scared; might just as well've been a lion for a second or so, the way I jumped. This kid, she gleamed out of the shadows the same way.

"Like the big brainless buffalo I am, I had to straighten up and

wave and grin, and before I could blink the old lady flashed off and collared the kid. My God, you wouldn't believe how that two-ton carcass could *move*! She'd caught her and had cuffed her in the face, forward and back, three times before I could get the slack out of my jaw.

"I don't know what sort of a noise I made but whatever it was it stopped her as if I'd thrown a brick. I got the girl away from her and then I went back and with my machete I chopped up the specimens into ensilage. Talk about substitution! I was wild!

"When the red fog went away I conveyed to Miguel that there was no *chapa* for him this day nor any other day when I saw them strike a child. Once he got the idea he turned and bitterly berated his wife, who screamed some things the gist of which was that I was an ungrateful scut because she had hit the child only for bringing no specimens. Miguel bellowed something to her and then turned to me all scrapes and smiles, and promised to arrange everything any way I wanted it.

"I growled like a grampus and charged off downstream. I was mad at everything and everybody. I've since gotten a cormless colchicum but I never saw another dwarf Chaya. Well ... the things you do ...

"I'd stamped along perhaps a hundred yards before I became aware that I still held the girl's arm. I stopped at once and hunkered down and gave her a hug and told her how sorry I was.

"She had two angry welts on one side of her face and three on the other; and she had those eyes; and you know, those eyes were just the way they'd been when I first saw them, fearless and untouched and untouchable.

"I'd had a strange semi-dream the day before, when I was trying to sleep through the throbbing of my arm. It was a sort of visualization of what would have happened in the flood if I hadn't been there, like a cinematograph, if you've ever seen one of the things. There she stood, and when the water reached her it turned and went around her, and the wind too, just as if she were under a bell-jar. Hm! But it wasn't like that, and here were the bruises on her face to prove it. At the same time the vision was correct, for no matter what happened to her, it couldn't really reach her. See what I mean?"

"Cowed," I said. "Poor kid."

He put his hands together and squeezed them for a moment. I

think he was angry at me. Then he relaxed. "Not cowed, Chip. You have to be afraid for that. Fearless, don't you understand? As much fear as a granite cliff looking at a hurricane, as much as a rose listening to garden shears."

"Beyond me," I said.

"Beyond me too," he said immediately. He looked at me. "I'll stop now?"

"Stop? No!"

"Very well. Don't forget, I didn't tell you to believe me. All I said was that it was the truth." He looked up at the sky. "I must hurry ...

"She didn't answer my hug or my apologies, but somehow I knew they reached the places where fear could not. Then I remembered what was in my specimen bag. I'd managed to find a child's dress in the trading post at Kofa. It was white with blue polka dots all over it, made of some heavy, hard-finish material that ought to wear a hole in sandpaper. I didn't think too much of it myself—it was only the best I could do—but I can't describe what happened when I handed it over.

"I mean just that, Chip—I can't describe it. Look, she couldn't or wouldn't talk. Whether she could hear or not I don't know. And she might as well have been born without motor nerves in her face, or at least her cheeks, because not once did she ever smile.

"Yet she stood looking at the dress when I shook it out, and perhaps her eyes got rounder. She didn't move, so I held it up against her. She put those eyes on me and slowly brought her hands together in front of her. I nodded my head and smiled and told her to go ahead, put it on, it's for you. And then she—"

Grantham twisted his thick forefinger into and out of his beard, picked up a pebble, threw it, watching studiously.

"—began to glow," he continued. "This Arizona moon, in the fall, when the brush-fires shroud the sky ... the moon's up, full, off the hills and you can't see it, and gradually you know it's there. It isn't a thing, it's a *place* in the sky, that's all. Then it rises higher, and the smoke blows down, and it gets brighter and brighter and brighter until—you don't know how or just when—you realize you could read a man's palm by it. The kid did that, somehow. When whatever she felt was at peak you—sort of—had to squinch up your eyes to see her." He punched the sand. "I

don't know," he muttered.

"She put up her hands to shuck out of the rag she was wearing and I turned my back. In a second she danced past me, wearing the blue-dotted dress. Her and that quiet, pock-marked, unsmiling little face, glowing like that, spinning like a barn swallow, balancing like a gull. Ever see a bird smile, Chip? A lily laugh? Does a passionflower have to sing? Hell. I mean, hell. Some people don't have to say anything.

"That was the first day I saw her do what I called her Yucca Dance. She stood on the cap of a rise in the yucca forest and the fresh damp buffalo grass hiding her feet. With her elbows close to her sides, her forearms stretched upward and her hands out, she just barely moved her fingers, and I suddenly got the idea—the still, thick stem, the branching of leaves, the long slender neck and crown of flowers.

"I laughed like a fool and ran to the nearest cactus. I pulled two firm white blossoms and went and put them in her hair, and stepped back, laughing. Both of them fell out, and she made no attempt to pick them up. I caught her eyes then, and I got the general idea that I'd made some sort of mistake. I stumbled back, feeling like a damned idiot, and she went back into her trance, being a yucca awaiting the wind.

"And when the wind came she made the only sound I ever heard from her, but for her footsteps. It was, in miniature, precisely the whispering of the leather leaves touching together. When the wind gusted, her whisper was with it, and she leaned with—with the—other—Chip?"

I said, "Yes, Grantham."

"You don't forget it, standing in her white dress with blue spots, rooted and spreading and stretched, whispering in the wind. Chip?"

I answered again.

"You know about the moth, Chip?"

I said, "Pronuba yuccasella."

He grinned. It was good to see his face relax. "Good entomology, for a botanist."

"Not especially," I said. "Pronuba's a fairly botanical sort of bug."

"Mmm." He nodded. "It doesn't eat anything but yucca nectar, and the yucca blossom can be fertilized by no other insect. Chip,

did you know a termite can't digest cellulose?"

"Out of my line."

"Well, it can't," said Grantham. "But there's a bacterium lives in his belly that can. And what he excretes, the termite feeds on."

"Symbiosis," I said.

"Wonder how you'd get along," he mused, "with folks who didn't know as much as you do? Yes, symbiosis. Two living things as dissimilar as a yucca and a moth, and neither can live without the other."

"Like Republicans and Dem—"

"Ah, stow it, cork it, and shove it," Grantham said bluntly. He looked at the western hills, and the light put blood on his great lion's head. "Pretty natural thing, that symbiosis. Lot of it around."

He began to talk again, rapidly, with, now and again, a quick glance at the darkling west. "Six months, seven, maybe, I collected around here. No trouble with Miguel. He collected a bunch of weeds and sticks, but once in a while he earned his keep, retroactively. The old lady kept her hands off. The kid spent every day with me. I guess I had the area pretty well sieved in four months, but I went out every day anyhow."

"I remember," I said.

"Yes, yes, I didn't send so many specimens. Later, none. I know. I said I was sor—"

For the first time I barked at him. "Go on with your story."

"Where—oh. The moth. The moth that won't go near anything but a yucca."

I thought he had forgotten me. "Hey," I said.

"She danced," he said, examining his hands carefully in the dim light, "any time it occurred to her, for a long time or a little. Or at night. At night," he said clearly, heaving himself upright and not looking at me, "the petals open and the moths fly. They were a cloud around her head."

I waited. He said, "It's only the truth. And once in the late sunset, still some light, and me close to her, I saw a moth crawl into her ear. I got scared, I—put out my hand to do something, pluck it out, shake her, do *something*. She didn't exactly push me away. She looked up at me and raised her hand, slowly—or it seemed to be slowly, but it was there before my hand was. She just stood, still as a tree, waiting, and the moth came out again."

I didn't say anything. Not anything at all. We sat watching the western mountains.

"I went away," said Grantham, his words stark and clear against the heat inside him. "To get more specimens, you understand."

"Some more came," I said.

"I was away for three months. A long time. Too long. Then I had no business back in Kofa but I went back anyway—oh, in case I'd left anything there or something. I was supposed to go back to the Institute, I guess. Mm.

"The first face I saw in Kofa that I knew was Miguel's. I fell over him. He was standing like a brown statue on the duckboards near the saloon and I tripped and knocked his hat off. I pulled him to his feet and asked him *Com' esta?*

"*Malo, muy malo* and a flood of north-Mex is all I could get. I guess I looked a little foolish. Why is it when you talk to someone who doesn't know your language, you holler at him? Finally I got impatient and ran him into the bar. I asked Big Horn what Miguel was trying to tell me.

"The general idea was that the little ones had died. I never did find out how many, two or three. Miguel shrugged at this, took off his hat, raised his eyes and his eyebrows, in that order, at the ceiling. I gather he felt no responsibility over this; such matters were out of his hands, but one could always make more. What bothered Miguel, Big Horn told me, was the loss of his wife, who had broken her leg, gotten a bone infection, and died *muy rapido*. She had been, it seemed, a very hard worker.

"The girl? He didn't know. He didn't know any more after I got excited and tried to shake it out of him. Big Horn was over the bar with his bung-starter before I could pull myself together. He never minded anybody getting rough at his bar providing both parties were enjoying it. He pointed out to me that Miguel had come in here peaceably even if I hadn't. Then he sat Miguel down and questioned him quietly while I fumed, and then he told Miguel to go, which he did much faster than usual.

" 'He says,' Big Horn told me, 'that the girl just wandered away. He says she always spent more nights out in the yucca forest than home anyhow. She went away and she just didn't come back. He says he went looking for her, too, after the old lady died. I guess he wanted his tortillas pounded. He looked real hard.'

"I told him thanks, and came out here. I wish you had the makings, Chip."

"Sorry," I said.

"I came out here and wandered for a while. A man can eat out here, sleep out here, right time of year. You could, Chip, knowing it just from books. I guess I felt real bad. Funny thing," he mused. "I wanted to call her, but I had never found out what her name was."

He was quiet. The evening breeze sprang and died, stopped and pressed and sprang again. The yuccas whispered and whispered.

"Hear?"

"I hear," I said.

"I heard it one night, sleeping here, and came up standing. There was no wind. She was here, right here, Chip. Dancing like a yucca, whispering."

"See her?"

"No, I didn't see her." I couldn't see his face, but I knew he was smiling, and I wondered what in time he was smiling about.

"You, Professor, you want something more than you want anything else there is, more than money or your name in books or a woman. You want that Pudley Chair in Botany. I bet you'd kill anyone who tried to get it away from you."

"Anyone but you."

His fringed shirt rustled as he twisted toward me. "You mean that. You do mean that. That's fine, Chip. That's nice." He rested his chin on his knees and paid attention to the evening star. "Everybody wants some one single thing that bad. Some get it, some don't. Some know what it is, some never find out. You found out. I found out."

"Want to tell me?"

"Sure I do. Sure. Chip, no offense, but you and I are different kinds of botanist."

"I know that. But—well, go on."

"You want botany out of books. Some window boxes, some lab, sure. You learned it right; there's not a thing wrong in being that way, you see? Very valuable. You learned botany so's you could be a botanist, the best damn botanist in the world, if you could make it. You might make it, too."

"And you?"

"I got to be a botanist so I could be—close to something."

Something like that symbiosis you were talking about. I'm a man, but man and cloverleaf, man and Chaya, man and piñon juniper—is that so much crazier than moth and cactus?"

I said nothing. I try to form my spoken opinions from some sort of precedent.

"Heard a story once about a man went away to a river island to carve statues. He carved statues for fourteen years and stashed 'em all in a big barn, dozens of 'em. When he figured his time was up, he dynamited the barn. Was he crazy?"

"Out of my field," I said briefly.

"I think I know why he did it. Other sculptors wanted to get close to people—moneywise, socialwise, what have you—and used sculpture to do it. This fellow, he just wanted to get close to sculpturing. Maybe people mattered to him, but sculpture mattered more. Now do you see?"

"You're trying to tell me that you want to go on with botany by yourself—no texts, no classes, no references."

He waved a hand; I saw it pass against the dark skyline. "Texts and references all here, Chip. Just not strained through a book first, that's all."

I said, "Then no reports, no books written, no articles in the *Journal*."

"That's right. This is for me."

"Selfish, isn't it?"

He said, very gently, "Not after eleven years in the Pudley Chair."

I understood that, and had nothing to say. Instead I asked him, "How close do you think you can carry this symbiosis of yours? Or was it just a figure of speech?"

"Time to show you, I reckon," he said. He rose. I followed.

"It's dark."

"Sure," he said. "I know the way. Hook on to the back of my belt."

I did, and he strode off purposefully into the pitch-black shadows of the yucca. How we turned, climbed, slithered, I couldn't say. It might have been a long way, and it might have been a circle.

We stopped. He fumbled in his pouch. "It's her birthday."

"How do you know?" I whispered. This was a place to whisper.

"Just know. Pick a day, stay with it from then on. Amounts to

the same thing. Here.”

He put something into my hand. Cloth, very fine cloth. Layers, lace. Hard knob one end, two sticks other end ...

“A doll.”

“Yup,” he said. “Purtiest one I ever saw.” He took it away from me. “Chip, hush now. Wait till the wind dies.”

I waited in the whispering dark. The breeze was fitful, careless. It would drop to almost nothing, until all the other breathings and stirrings could be heard, and then giggle on up to be a breeze again. Suddenly, then, it was gone. From before us, in the pitch blackness, a yucca whispered.

“There she is,” Grantham murmured. He stepped forward, and an unreasoning terror sent cold sweat oozing in my armpits. I stepped after him. He was leaning forward, apparently putting the doll into the lower swords of a young yucca.

Something touched my face and I bit my tongue. Then I realized that Grantham’s heavy hand had tilted the plant toward us. Without conscious motivation I reached up swiftly and closed my hand on a flower. Without conscious reasoning I was exquisitely careful to twist it free without a sound or a detectible motion. I slipped it into my side pocket.

“ ’Bye, baby.” He stood up and nudged me. “Let’s go.”

If anything, the way back was longer. I stumbled along behind him, wondering if he were sane enough to write that resignation coherently. When we reached the trail a loom of silver was staining the eastern sky. “Easy going now,” was all he said.

We trudged into the rising moon. I was deeply disturbed, but Grantham was calm and apparently deeply content.

The yuccas thinned, and we started up the valley’s throat. Abruptly Grantham grunted and stopped.

“What is it?”

Silently he pointed. Fifty feet up the slope something wavered and flickered in the moonlight. “Bless her heart,” he said. “Come on, Chip.”

He struck off toward whatever it was, and I followed him, walking on the balls of my feet, my eyes too wide, so that they hurt.

When I caught up with him he stopped, turned to me, and drew his knife. “Symbiosis, Chip.”

I don’t think he could see my face. I wouldn’t want to.

He dropped to one knee and I leapt backward, stood spraddled, gasping. I watched him digging carefully in the ground, while over and around him fluttered a silent cloud of small white moths. They were not yucca moths. I know they weren't because yucca moths never, *never* cluster near the ground. I mean, moths that cluster that way are not yucca moths, they aren't, they were not, they couldn't be.

Look it up if you don't believe it.

Grantham grunted, pulled, and up out of the ground came an object that looked like a large parsnip. "Ever see one of these in the flesh, Chip?"

Gingerly, I took it, squinted at it in the brightening moonlight. It was like a tuber, spineless, and with the upper end rounded and ribbed. I slipped my fingers along the grooves between the ribs and felt the small round protuberances.

"Lophophora," I said. My voice sounded odd to me. "I don't know which one."

"Doesn't matter." He trimmed off the grooved part and dropped it into his satchel. "Long as it's peyotl, who's quibbling?"

Back on the trail, I swallowed hard and asked, "That's symbiosis? You leave a doll on a yucca, and moths find peyotl for you?"

He laughed his big laugh. "You can't see further than your nose," he said gaily and insultingly, "let alone as far as your front teeth."

"If you'll explain," I said stiffly, "I shall listen."

"The doll's a symbol," he said, suddenly deeply serious. "It represents something as vital as cellulose to a bacterium, or bacterial products to a termite. I didn't need the doll itself, except it was her birthday. Long as I bring what she needs—and I do."

"And it—she—I mean, you get peyotl out of it," I floundered. "That's no symbol. That's cash money."

"It is? What do I do with the money? Well, *what?*"

"Grubstake," I mumbled, frightened by his intensity.

"I sell it for just what I need, no more," he said. "And with it I stay out here and"—he chuckled—"study my references."

At the saloon Grantham wrote his resignation, and I was glad to see that it was written exactly as the old Grantham would have done it. I tucked it away safely. We dined heartily and slept in the same room back of the bar, and in the morning he helped me buy

a horse. It was, therefore, not until I was out on the hot sand again that I had a chance to study my specimen.

I felt very good that morning. I was, of course, sorry for poor mad Grantham. On the other hand—what was the little white moth that clustered over peyotl at night? Not the yucca moth, surely. Surely not.

I wondered what had happened to that strange, pathetic little girl. Wandered out in her blue polka-dot dress to die among the yuccas, no doubt.

I studied the wilted flower as I rode. Poor Grantham! This was enough to tip any trained botanist over the edge—this freak, sport, mutant yucca. Who ever heard of a white yucca flower with a large blue patch on each petal?

I closed my eyes and smiled, seeing through the red heat-haze of my lids the cool shadowed library, turning the clop-clop of my horse into the delicate music of teacups on saucers.

The Golden Helix

TOD AWOKE FIRST, probably because he was so curious, so deeply alive; perhaps because he was (or had been) seventeen. He fought back, but the manipulators would not be denied. They bent and flexed his arms and legs, squeezed his chest, patted and rasped and abraded him. His joints creaked, his sluggish blood clung sleepily to the walls of his veins, reluctant to move after so long.

He gasped and shouted as needles of cold played over his body, gasped again and screamed when his skin sensitized and the tingling intensified to a scald. Then he fainted, and probably slept, for he easily reawoke when someone else started screaming.

He felt weak and ravenous, but extraordinarily well rested. His first conscious realization was that the manipulators had withdrawn from his body, as had the needles from the back of his neck. He put a shaky hand back there and felt the traces of spot-tape, already half-fused with his healing flesh.

He listened comfortably to this new screaming, satisfied that it was not his own. He let his eyes open, and a great wonder came over him when he saw that the lid of his Coffin stood open.

He clawed upward, sat a moment to fight a vicious swirl of vertigo, vanquished it, and hung his chin on the edge of the Coffin.

The screaming came from April's Coffin. It was open too. Since the two massive boxes touched and their hinges were on opposite sides, he could look down at her. The manipulators were at work on the girl's body, working with competent violence. She seemed to be caught up in some frightful nightmare, lying on her back, dreaming of riding a runaway bicycle with an off-center pedal sprocket and epicyclic hubs. And all the while her arms seemed to be flailing at a cloud of dream-hornets round her tossing head. The needle-cluster rode with her head, fanning out behind the nape like the mechanical extrapolation of an Elizabethan collar.

Tod crawled to the end of his Coffin, stood up shakily, and grasped the horizontal bar set at chest level. He got an arm over

it and snugged it close under his armpit. Half-suspended, he could then manage one of his feet over the edge, then the other, to the top step. He lowered himself until he sat on it, outside the Coffin at last, and slumped back to rest. When his furious lungs and battering heart calmed themselves, he went down the four steps one at a time, like an infant, on his buttocks.

April's screams stopped.

Tod sat on the bottom step, jackknifed by fatigue, his feet on the metal floor, his knees in the hollows between his pectorals and his shoulders. Before him, on a low pedestal, was a cube with a round switch-disc on it. When he could, he inched a hand forward and let it fall on the disc. There was an explosive tinkle and the front panel of the cube disappeared, drifting slowly away as a fine glittering dust. He lifted his heavy hand and reached inside. He got one capsule, two, carried them to his lips. He rested, then took a beaker from the cube. It was three-quarters full of purple crystals. He bumped it on the steel floor. The beaker's cover powdered and fell in, and the crystals were suddenly a liquid, effervescing violently. When it subsided, he drank it down. He belched explosively, and then his head cleared, his personal horizons expanded to include the other Coffins, the compartment walls, the ship itself and its mission.

Out there somewhere—somewhere close, now—was Sirius and its captive planet, Terra Prime. Earth's first major colony, Prime would one day flourish as Earth never had, for it would be a planned and tailored planet. Eight and a half light-years from Earth, Prime's population was composed chiefly of Earth immigrants, living in pressure domes and slaving to alter the atmosphere of the planet to Earth normal. Periodically there must be an infusion of Earth blood to keep the strain as close as possible on both planets, for unless a faster-than-light drive could be developed, there could be no frequent interchange between the worlds. What took light eight years took humans half a lifetime. The solution was the Coffins—the marvelous machine in which a man could slip into a sleep which was more than sleep while still on Earth, and awaken years later in space, near his destination, subjectively only a month or so older. Without the Coffins there could be only divergence, possibly mutation. Humanity wanted to populate the stars—but with humanity.

Tod and his five shipmates were hand-picked. They had superiorities—mechanical, mathematical, and artistic aptitudes. But they were not all completely superior. One does not populate a colony with leaders alone and expect it to live. They, like the rest of their cargo (machine designs, microfilms of music and art, technical and medical writings, novels and entertainment) were neither advanced nor extraordinary. Except for Teague, they were the tested median, the competent; they were basic blood for a mass, rather than an elite.

Tod glanced around the blank walls and into the corner where a thin line delineated the sealed door. He ached to fling it open and skid across the corridor, punch the control which would slide away the armor which masked the port, and soak himself in his first glimpse of outer space. He had heard so much about it, but he had never seen it—they had all been deep in their timeless sleep before the ship had blasted off.

But he sighed and went instead to the Coffins.

Alma's was still closed, but there was sound and motion, in varying degrees, from all the others.

He glanced first into April's Coffin. She seemed to be asleep now. The needle-cluster and manipulators had withdrawn. Her skin glowed; it was alive and as unlike its former monochrome waxiness as it could be. He smiled briefly and went to look at Teague.

Teague, too, was in real slumber. The fierce vertical line between his brows was shallow now, and the hard, deft hands lax and uncharacteristically purposeless. Tod had never seen him before without a focus for those narrow, blazing green eyes, without decisive spring and balance in his pose. It was good, somehow, to feel that for all his responsibilities, Teague could be as helpless as anyone.

Tod smiled as he passed Alma's closed Coffin. He always smiled at Alma when he saw her, when he heard her voice, when she crossed his thoughts. It was possible to be very brave around Alma, for gentleness and comfort were so ready that it was almost not necessary to call upon them. One could bear anything, knowing she was there.

Tod crossed the chamber and looked at the last pair. Carl was a furious blur of motion, his needle-cluster swinging free, his manipulators in the final phase. He grunted instead of screaming,

a series of implosive, startled gasps. His eyes were open but only the whites showed.

Moira was quite relaxed, turned on her side, poured out on the floor of the Coffin like a long golden cat. She seemed in a contented abandonment of untroubled sleep.

He heard a new sound and went back to April. She was sitting up, cross-legged, her head bowed apparently in deep concentration. Tod understood; he knew that sense of achievement and the dedication of an entire psyche to the proposition that these weak and trembling arms which hold one up shall *not* bend.

He reached in and gently lifted the soft white hair away from her face. She raised the albino's fathomless ruby eyes to him and whimpered.

"Come on," he said quietly. "We're here." When she did not move, he balanced on his stomach on the edge of the Coffin and put one hand between her shoulder blades. "Come on."

She pitched forward but he caught her so that she stayed kneeling. He drew her up and forward and put her hands on the bar. "Hold tight, Ape," he said. She did, while he lifted her thin body out of the Coffin and stood her on the top step. "Let go now. Lean on me."

Mechanically, she obeyed, and he brought her down until she sat, as he had, on the bottom step. He punched the switch at her feet and put the capsules in her mouth while she looked up at him numbly, as if hypnotized. He got her beaker, thumped it, held it until its foaming subsided, and then put an arm around her shoulders while she drank. She closed her eyes and slumped against him, breathing deeply at first, and later, for a moment that frightened him, not at all. Then she sighed, "Tod ..."

"I'm here, Ape."

She straightened up, turned and looked at him. She seemed to be trying to smile, but she shivered instead. "I'm cold."

He rose, keeping one hand on her shoulder until he was sure she could sit up unassisted, and then brought her a cloak from the clips outside the Coffin. He helped her with it, knelt and put on her slippers for her. She sat quite still, hugging the garment tight to her. At last she looked around and back; up, around, and back again. "We're—there!" she breathed.

"We're *here*," he corrected.

“Yes, here. Here. How long do you suppose we ...”

“We won’t know exactly until we can take some readings. Twenty-five, twenty-seven years—maybe more.”

She said, “I could be old, old—” She touched her face, brought her fingertips down to the sides of her neck. “I could be forty, even!”

He laughed at her, and then a movement caught the corner of his eye. “Carl!”

Carl was sitting sidewise on the edge of his Coffin, his feet still inside. Weak or no, bemused as could be expected, Carl should have grinned at Tod, should have made some healthy, swaggering gesture. Instead he sat still, staring about him in utter puzzlement. Tod went to him. “Carl! Carl, we’re here!”

Carl looked at him dully. Tod was unaccountably disturbed. Carl always shouted, always bounced; Carl had always seemed to be just a bit larger inside than he was outside, ready to burst through, always thinking faster, laughing more quickly than anyone else.

He allowed Tod to help him down the steps, and sat heavily while Tod got his capsules and beaker for him. Waiting for the liquid to subside, he looked around numbly. Then drank, and almost toppled. April and Tod held him up. When he straightened again, it was abruptly. “Hey!” he roared. “We’re here!” He looked up at them. “April! Tod-o! Well what do you know—how are you, kids?”

“Carl?” The voice was the voice of a flute, if a flute could whisper. They looked up. There was a small golden surf of hair tumbled on and over the edge of Moira’s Coffin.

Weakly, eagerly, they clambered up to Moira and helped her out. Carl breathed such a sigh of relief that Tod and April stopped to smile at him, at each other.

Carl shrugged out of his weakness as if it were an uncomfortable garment and went to be close to Moira, to care about Moira and nothing else.

A deep labored voice called, “Who’s up?”

“Teague! It’s Teague ... all of us, Teague,” called Tod. “Carl and Moira and April and me. All except Alma.”

Slowly Teague’s great head rose out of the Coffin. He looked around with the controlled motion of a radar sweep. When his head stopped its one turning, the motion seemed relayed to his

body, which began to move steadily upward. The four who watched him knew intimately what this cost him in sheer willpower, yet no one made any effort to help. Unasked, one did not help Teague.

One leg over, the second. He ignored the bar and stepped down to seat himself on the bottom step as if it were a throne. His hands moved very slowly but without faltering as he helped himself to the capsules, then the beaker. He permitted himself a moment of stillness, eyes closed, nostrils pinched; then life coursed strongly into him. It was as if his muscles visibly filled out a little. He seemed heavier and taller, and when he opened his eyes, they were the deeply vital, commanding light-sources which had drawn them, linked them, led them all during their training.

He looked toward the door in the corner. "Has anyone—"

"We were waiting for you," said Tod. "Shall we ... can we go look now? I want to see the stars."

"We'll see to Alma first." Teague rose, ignoring the lip of his Coffin and the handhold it offered. He went to Alma's. With his height, he was the only one among them who could see through the top plate without mounting the steps.

Then, without turning, he said, "Wait."

The others, half across the room from him, stopped. Teague turned to them. There was no expression on his face at all. He stood quite motionless for perhaps ten seconds, and then quietly released a breath. He mounted the steps of Alma's Coffin, reached, and the side nearest his own machine sank silently into the floor. He stepped down, and spent a long moment bent over the body inside. From where they stood, tense and frightened, the others could not see inside. They made no effort to move closer.

"Tod," said Teague, "get the kit. Surgery *Lambda*. Moira, I'll need you."

The shock of it went to Tod's bones, regenerated, struck him again; yet so conditioned was he to Teague's commands that he was on his feet and moving before Teague had stopped speaking. He went to the after bulkhead and swung open a panel, pressed a stud. There was a metallic whisper, and the heavy case slid out at his feet. He lugged it over to Teague, and helped him rack it on the side of the Coffin. Teague immediately plunged his hands through the membrane at one end of the kit, nodding to Moira to

do likewise at the other. Tod stepped back, studiously avoiding a glance in at Alma, and returned to April. She put both her hands tight around his left biceps and leaned close. "*Lambda*..." she whispered.

"That's ... parturition, isn't it?"

He shook his head. "Parturition is Surgery *Kappa*," he said painfully. He swallowed. "*Lambda*'s cesarean."

Her crimson eyes widened. "Cesarean? *Alma*? She'd never need a cesarean!"

He turned to look at her, but he could not see, his eyes stung so. "Not while she lived, she wouldn't," he whispered. He felt the small white hands tighten painfully on his arm. Across the room, Carl sat quietly. Tod squashed the water out of his eyes with the heel of his hand. Carl began pounding knuckles, very slowly, against his own temple.

Teague and Moira were busy for a long time.

II

Tod pulled in his legs and lowered his head until the kneecaps pressed cruelly against his eyebrow ridges. He hugged his shins, ground his back into the wall-panels, and in this red-spangled blackness he let himself live back and back to Alma and joy, Alma and comfort, Alma and courage.

He had sat once, just this way, twisted by misery and anger, blind and helpless, in a dark corner of an equipment shed at the spaceport. The rumor had circulated that April would not come after all, because albinism and the Sirius Rock would not mix. It turned out to be untrue, but that did not matter at the time. He had punched her, punched *Alma*! because in all the world he had been given nothing else to strike out at, and she had found him and had sat down to be with him. She had not even touched her face, where the blood ran; she simply waited until at last he flung himself on her lap and wept like an infant. And no one but he and Alma ever knew of it....

He remembered Alma with the spaceport children, rolling and tumbling on the lawn with them, and in the pool; and he remembered Alma, her face still, looking up at the stars with her soft and gentle eyes, and in those eyes he had seen a challenge as implacable and pervasive as space itself. The tumbling on the lawn, the towering dignity—these co-existed in Alma without

friction. He remembered things she had said to him; for each of the things he could recall the kind of light, the way he stood, the very smell of the air at the time. "Never be afraid, Tod. Just think of the worst possible thing that might happen. What you're afraid of will probably not be *that* bad—and anything else just has to be better." And she said once, "Don't confuse logic and truth, however good the logic. You can stick one end of logic in solid ground and throw the other end clear out of the cosmos without breaking it. Truth's a little less flexible." And, "Of *course* you need to be loved, Tod! Don't be ashamed of that, or try to change it. It's not a thing you have to worry about, ever. You are loved. April loves you. And I love you. Maybe I love you even more than April, because she loves everything you are, but I love everything you were and ever will be."

And some of the memories were deeper and more important even than these, but were memories of small things—the meeting of eyes, the touch of a hand, the sound of laughter or a snatch of song, distantly.

Tod descended from memory into a blackness that was only loss and despair, and then a numbness, followed by a reluctant awareness. He became conscious of what, in itself, seemed the merest of trifles: that there was a significance in his pose there against the bulkhead. Unmoving, he considered it. It was comfortable, to be so turned in upon oneself, and so protected, unaware ... and Alma would have hated to see him this way.

He threw up his head, and self-consciously straightened from his foetal posture. *That's over now*, he told himself furiously, and then, dazed, wondered what he had meant.

He turned to look at April. She was huddled miserably against him, her face and body lax, stopped, disinterested. He thumped his elbow into her ribs, hard enough to make her remember she had ribs. She looked up into his eyes and said, "How? How could ..."

Tod understood. Of the three couples standard for each ship of the Sirian project, one traditionally would beget children on the planet; one, earlier, as soon as possible after awakening; and one still earlier, for conception would take place within the Coffin. But—not *before* awakening, and surely not long enough before to permit of gestation. It was an impossibility; the vital processes were so retarded within the Coffin that, effectively, there would

be no stirring of life at all. So—"How?" April pleaded. "How could ..."

Tod gazed upon his own misery, then April's, and wondered what it must be that Teague was going through.

Teague, without looking up, said, "Tod."

Tod patted April's shoulder, rose and went to Teague. He did not look into the Coffin. Teague, still working steadily, tilted his head to one side to point. "I need a little more room here."

Tod lifted the transparent cube Teague had indicated and looked at the squirming pink bundle inside.

He almost smiled. It was a nice baby. He took one step away and Teague said, "Take 'em all, Tod."

He stacked them and carried them to where April sat. Carl rose and came over, and knelt. The boxes hummed—a vibration which could be felt, not heard—as nutrient-bearing air circulated inside and back to the power-packs. "A nice normal deliv—I mean, a nice normal batch o' brats," Carl said. "Four girls, one boy. Just right."

Tod looked up at him. "There's one more, I think."

There was—another girl. Moira brought it over in the sixth box. "Sweet," April breathed, watching them. "They're sweet."

Moira said, wearily, "That's all."

Tod looked up at her.

"Alma ...?"

Moira waved laxly toward the neat stack of incubators. "That's all," she whispered tiredly, and went to Carl.

That's all there is of Alma, Tod thought bitterly. He glanced across at Teague. The tall figure raised a steady hand, wiped his face with his upper arm. His raised hand touched the high end of the Coffin, and for an instant held a grip. Teague's face lay against his arm, pillowed, hidden and still. Then he completed the wiping motion and began stripping the sterile plastic skin from his hands. Tod's heart went out to him, but he bit the insides of his cheeks and kept silent. *A strange tradition*, thought Tod, *that makes it impolite to grieve ...*

Teague dropped the shreds of plastic into the disposal slot and turned to face them. He looked at each in turn, and each in turn found some measure of control. He turned then, and pulled a lever, and the side of Alma's Coffin slid silently up.

Good-bye ...

Tod put his back against the bulkhead and slid down beside April. He put an arm over her shoulders. Carl and Moira sat close, holding hands. Moira's eyes were shadowed but very much awake. Carl bore an expression almost of sullenness. Tod glanced, then glared at the boxes. Three of the babies were crying, though of course they could not be heard through the plastic incubators. Tod was suddenly conscious of Teague's eyes upon him. He flushed, and then let his anger drain to the capacious inner reservoir which must hold it and all his grief as well.

When he had their attention, Teague sat cross-legged before them and placed a small object on the floor.

Tod looked at the object. At first glance it seemed to be a metal spring about as long as his thumb, mounted vertically on a black base. Then he realized that it was an art object of some kind, made of a golden substance which shimmered and all but flowed. It was an interlocked double spiral; the turns went round and up, round and down, round and up again, the texture of the gold clearly indicating, in a strange and alive way, which symbolized a rising and falling flux. Shaped as if it had been wound on a cylinder and the cylinder removed, the thing was formed of a continuous wire or rod which had no beginning and no end, but which turned and rose and turned and descended again in an exquisite continuity.... Its base was formless, an almost-smoke just as the gold showed an almost-flux; and it was as lightless as ylem.

Teague said, "This was in Alma's Coffin. It was not there when we left Earth."

"It must have been," said Carl flatly.

Teague silently shook his head. April opened her lips, closed them again. Teague said, "Yes, April?"

April shook her head. "Nothing, Teague. Really nothing." But because Teague kept looking at her, waiting, she said, "I was going to say ... it's beautiful." She hung her head.

Teague's lips twitched. Tod could sense the sympathy there. He stroked April's silver hair. She responded, moving her shoulder slightly under his hand. "What is it, Teague?"

When Teague would not answer, Moira asked, "Did it ... had it anything to do with Alma?"

Teague picked it up thoughtfully. Tod could see the yellow

loom it cast against his throat and cheek, the golden points it built in his eyes. "Something did." He paused. "You know she was supposed to conceive on awakening. But to give birth—"

Carl cracked a closed hand against his forehead. "She must have been awake for anyway two hundred and eighty days!"

"Maybe she made it," said Moira.

Tod watched Teague's hand half-close on the object as if it might be precious now. Moira's was a welcome thought, and the welcome could be read on Teague's face. Watching it, Tod saw the complicated spoor of a series of efforts—a gathering of emotions, a determination; the closing of certain doors, the opening of others.

Teague rose. "We have a ship to inspect, sights to take, calculations ... we've got to tune in Terra Prime, send them a message if we can. Tod, check the corridor air."

"The stars—we'll see the stars!" Tod whispered to April, the heady thought all but eclipsing everything else. He bounded to the corner where the door controls waited. He punched the test button, and a spot of green appeared over the door, indicating that with their awakening, the evacuated chambers, the living and control compartments, had been flooded with air and warmed. "Air okay."

"Go on then."

They crowded around Tod as he grasped the lever and pushed. *I won't wait for orders, Tod thought. I'll slide right across the corridor and open the guard plate and there it'll be—space, and stars!*

The door opened.

There was no corridor, no bulkhead, no armored port-hole, no

No ship!

There was a night out there, dank, warm. It was wet. In it were hooked, fleshy leaves and a tangle of roots; a thing with legs which hopped up on the sill and shimmered its wings for them; a thing like a flying hammer which crashed in and smote the shimmering one and was gone with it, leaving a stain on the deck-plates. There was a sky aglow with a ghastly green. There was a thrashing and a scream out there, a pressure of growth, and a wrongness.

Blood ran down Tod's chin. His teeth met through his lower lip. He turned and looked past three sets of terrified eyes to Teague,

who said, "Shut it!"

Tod snatched at the control. It broke off in his hand ...

How long does a thought, a long thought, take? Tod stood with the fractured metal in his hand and thought:

We were told that above all things we must adapt. We were told that perhaps there would be a thin atmosphere by now, on Terra Prime, but that in all likelihood we must live a new kind of life in pressure-domes. We were warned that what we might find would be flash-mutation, where the people could be more or less than human. We were warned, even, that there might be no life on Prime at all. But look at me now—look at all of us. We weren't meant to adapt to this! And we can't ...

Somebody shouted while somebody shrieked, each sound a word, each destroying the other. Something thick as a thumb, long as a hand, with a voice like a distant airhorn, hurtled through the door and circled the room. Teague snatched a folded cloak from the clothing rack and, poising just a moment, batted it out of the air. It skittered, squirming, across the metal door. He threw the cloak on it to capture it. "Get that door closed."

Carl snatched the broken control lever out of Tod's hand and tried to fit it back into the switch mounting. It crumbled as if it were dried bread. Tod stepped outside, hooked his hands on the edge of the door, and pulled. It would not budge. A lizard as long as his arm scuttled out of the twisted grass and stopped to stare at him. He shouted at it, and with forelegs much too long for such a creature, it pressed itself upward until its body was forty-five degrees from the horizontal, it flicked the end of its long tail upward, and something flew over its head toward Tod, buzzing angrily. Tod turned to see what it was, and as he did the lizard struck from one side and April from the other.

April succeeded and the lizard failed, for its fangs clashed and it fell forward, but April's shoulder had taken Tod on the chest and, off balance as he was, he went flat on his back. The cold, dry, pulsing tail swatted his hand. He gripped it convulsively, held on tight. Part of the tail broke off and buzzed, flipping about on the ground like a click-beetle. But the rest held. Tod scuttled backward to pull the lizard straight as it began to turn on him, got his knees under him, then his feet. He swung the lizard twice around his head and smashed it against the inside of the open

door. The part of the tail he was holding then broke off, and the scaly thing thumped inside and slid, causing Moira to leap so wildly to get out of its way that she nearly knocked the stocky Carl off his feet.

Teague swept away the lid of the Surgery *Lambda* kit, inverted it, kicked the clutter of instruments and medicaments aside and clapped the inverted box over the twitching, scaly body.

“April!” Tod shouted. He ran around in a blind semicircle, saw her struggling to her feet in the grass, snatched her up and bounded inside with her. “Carl!” he gasped, “Get the door ...”

But Carl was already moving forward with a needle torch. With two deft motions he sliced out a section of the power-arm which was holding the door open. He swung the door to, yelling, “Parametal!”

Tod, gasping, ran to the lockers and brought a length of the synthetic. Carl took the wide ribbon and with a snap of the wrists broke it in two. Each half he bent (for it was very flexible when moved slowly) into a U. He placed one against the door and held out his hand without looking. Tod dropped the hammer into it. Carl tapped the parametal gently and it adhered to the door. He turned his face away and struck it sharply. There was a blue-white flash and the U was rigid and firmly welded to the door. He did the same thing with the other U, welding it to the nearby wall plates. Into the two gudgeons thus formed, Moira dropped a luxalloy bar, and the door was secured.

“Shall I sterilize the floor?” Moira asked.

“No,” said Teague shortly.

“But—bacteria ... spores ...”

“Forget it,” said Teague.

April was crying. Tod held her close, but made no effort to stop her. Something in him, deeper than panic, more essential than wonderment, understood that she could use this circumstance to spend her tears for Alma, and that these tears must be shed now or swell and burst her heart. So *cry*, he pled silently, *cry for both of us, all of us*.

With the end of action, belated shock spread visibly over Carl’s face. “The ship’s gone,” he said stupidly. “We’re on a planet.” He looked at his hands, turned abruptly to the door, stared at it and began to shiver. Moira went to him and stood quietly, not touching him—just being near, in case she should be needed.

April grew gradually silent. Carl said, “I—” and then shook his head.

Click. Shh. Clack, click. Methodically Teague was stacking the scattered contents of the medical kit. Tod patted April’s shoulder and went to help. Moira glanced at them, peered closely into Carl’s face, then left him and came to lend a hand. April joined them, and at last Carl. They swept up and racked and stored the clutter, and when Teague lowered a table, they helped get the dead lizard on it and pegged out for dissection. Moira cautiously disentangled the huge insect from the folds of the cloak and clapped a box over it, slid the lid underneath to bring the feebly squirming thing to Teague. He studied it for a long moment, then set it down and peered at the lizard. With forceps, he opened the jaws and bent close. He grunted. “April ...”

She came to look. Teague touched the fangs with the tip of a scalpel. “Look there.”

“Grooves,” she said. “Like a snake.”

Teague reversed the scalpel and with the handle he gingerly pressed upward, at the root of one of the fangs. A cloudy yellow liquid beaded, ran down the groove. He dropped the scalpel and slipped a watch-glass under the tooth to catch the droplet. “Analyze that later,” he murmured. “But I’d say you saved Tod from something pretty nasty.”

“I didn’t even think,” said April. “I didn’t ... I never knew there was any animal life on Prime. I wonder what they call this monster.”

“The honors are yours, April. You name it.”

“They’ll have a classification for it already!”

“Who?”

Everyone started to talk, and abruptly stopped. In the awkward silence Carl’s sudden laugh boomed. It was a wondrous sound in the frightened chamber. There was comprehension in it, and challenge, and above all, Carl himself—boisterous and impulsive, quick, sure. The laugh was triggered by the gush of talk and its sudden cessation, a small thing in itself. But its substance was understanding, and with that an emotional surge, and with that, the choice of the one emotional expression Carl would always choose.

“Tell them, Carl,” Teague said.

Carl’s teeth flashed. He waved a thick arm at the door. “That

this isn't Sirius Prime. Nor Earth. Go ahead, April—name your pet."

April, staring at the lizard, said, "*Crotalidus*, then, because it has a rattle and fangs like a diamondback." Then she paled and turned to Carl, as the full weight of his statement came on her. "Not—not *Prime*?"

Quietly, Teague said, "Nothing like these ever grew on Earth. And Prime is a cold planet. It could never have a climate like that," he nodded toward the door, "no matter how much time has passed."

"But what ... where ..." It was Moira.

"We'll find out when we can. But the instruments aren't here—they were in the ship."

"But if it's a new ... another planet, why didn't you let me sterilize? What about airborne spores? Suppose it had been methane out there or—"

"We've obviously been conditioned to anything in the atmosphere. As to its composition—well, it isn't poisonous, or we wouldn't be standing here talking about it. Wait!" He held up a hand and quelled the babble of questions before it could fully start. "Wondering is a luxury like worrying. We can't afford either. We'll get our answers when we get more evidence."

"What shall we do?" asked April faintly.

"Eat," said Teague. "Sleep." They waited. Teague said, "Then we go outside."

III

There were stars like daisies in a field, like dust in a sunbeam, and like flying, flaming mountains; near ones, far ones, stars of every color and every degree of brilliance. And there were bands of light which must be stars too distant to see. And something was stealing the stars, not taking them away, but swallowing them up, coming closer and closer, eating as it came. And at last there was only one left. Its name was Alma, and it was gone, and there was nothing left but an absorbent blackness and an aching loss.

In this blackness Tod's eyes snapped open, and he gasped, frightened and lost.

"You awake, Tod?" April's small hand touched his face. He took it and drew it to his lips, drinking comfort from it.

From the blackness came Carl's resonant whisper, "We're awake. Teague?..."

The lights flashed on, dim first, brightening swiftly, but not so fast as to dazzle unsuspecting eyes. Tod sat up and saw Teague at the table. On it was the lizard, dissected and laid out as neatly as an exploded view in a machine manual. Over the table, on a gooseneck, was a floodlamp with its lens masked by an infrared filter. Teague turned away from the table, pushing up his "black-light" goggles, and nodded to Tod. There were shadows under his eyes, but otherwise he seemed the same as ever. Tod wondered how many lonely hours he had worked while the two couples slept, doing that meticulous work under the irritating glow so that they would be undisturbed.

Tod went to him. "Has my playmate been talking much?" He pointed at the remains of the lizard.

"Yes and no," said Teague. "Oxygen-breather, all right, and a true lizard. He had a secret weapon—that tail-segment he flips over his head toward his victims. It has primitive ganglia like an Earth salamander's, so that the tail-segment trembles and squirms, sounding the rattles, after he throws it. He also has a skeleton that—but all this doesn't matter. Most important is that he's the analog of our early Permian life, which means (unless he's an evolutionary dead-end like a cockroach) that this planet is a billion years old at the least. And the little fellow here—" he touched the flying thing—"bears this out. It's not an insect, you know. It's an arachnid."

"With *wings*?"

Teague lifted the slender, scorpion-like pincers of the creature and let them fall. "Flat chitinous wings are no more remarkable a leg adaptation than those things. Anyway, in spite of the ingenuity of his engineering, internally he's pretty primitive. All of which lets us hypothesize that we'll find fairly close analogs of what we're used to on Earth."

"Teague," Tod interrupted, his voice lowered, his eyes narrowed to contain the worry that threatened to spill over, "Teague, what's happened?"

"The temperature and humidity here seem to be exactly the same as that outside," Teague went on, in precisely the same tone as before. "This would indicate either a warm planet, or a warm season on a temperate planet. In either case it is obvious that—"

“But, Teague—”

“—that a good deal of theorizing is possible with very little evidence, and we need not occupy ourselves with anything else but that evidence.”

“Oh,” said Tod. He backed off a step. “Oh,” he said again, “sorry, Teague.” He joined the others at the food dispensers, feeling like a cuffed puppy. *But he’s right*, he thought. *As Alma said ... of the many things which might have happened, only one actually has. Let’s wait, then, and worry about that one thing when we can name it.*

There was a pressure on his arm. He looked up from his thoughts and into April’s searching eyes. He knew that she had heard, and he was unreasonably angry at her. “Damn it, he’s so cold-blooded,” he blurted defensively, but in a whisper.

April said, “He has to stay with things he can understand, every minute.” She glanced swiftly at the closed Coffin. “Wouldn’t you?”

There was a sharp pain and a bitterness in Tod’s throat as he thought about it. He dropped his eyes and mumbled, “No, I wouldn’t. I don’t think I could.” There was a difference in his eyes as he glanced back at Teague. *But it’s so easy, after all, for strong people to be strong*, he thought.

“Teague, what’ll we wear?” Carl called.

“Skinflex.”

“Oh, no!” cried Moira. “It’s so clingy and hot!”

Carl laughed at her. He swept up the lizard’s head and opened its jaws. “Smile at the lady. She wouldn’t put any tough old skinflex in the way of your pretty teeth!”

“Put it down,” said Teague sharply, though there was a flicker of amusement in his eyes. “It’s still loaded with God-knows-what alkaloid. Moira, he’s right. Skinflex just doesn’t puncture.”

Moira looked respectfully at the yellow fangs and went obediently to storage, where she pulled out the suits.

“We’ll keep close together, back to back,” said Teague as they helped each other into the suits. “All the weapons are ... were ... in the forward storage compartment, so we’ll improvise. Tod, you and the girls each take a globe of anesthene. It’s the fastest anesthetic we have and it ought to take care of anything that breathes oxygen. I’ll take scalpels. Carl—”

"The hammer," Carl grinned. His voice was fairly thrumming with excitement.

"We won't attempt to fasten the door from outside. I don't mean to go farther than ten meters out, this first time. Just—you, Carl—lift off the bar as we go out, get the door shut as quickly as possible, and prop it there. Whatever happens, do not attack anything out there unless you are attacked first, or unless I say so."

Hollow-eyed, steady, Teague moved to the door with the others close around him. Carl shifted the hammer to his left hand, lifted the bar and stood back a little, holding it like a javelin. Teague, holding a glittering lancet lightly in each hand, pushed the door open with his foot. They boiled through, stepped aside for Carl as he butted the rod deep into the soil and against the closed door. "All set."

They moved as a unit for perhaps three meters, and stopped.

It was daytime now, but such a day as none of them had dreamed of. The light was green, very nearly a lime-green, and the shadows were purple. The sky was more lavender than blue. The air was warm and wet.

They stood at the top of a low hill. Before them a tangle of jungle tumbled up at them. So vital, so completely alive, it seemed to move by its own power of growth. Stirring, murmuring, it was too big, too much, too wide and deep and intertwined to assimilate at a glance; the thought, *this is a jungle*, was a pitiable understatement.

To the left, savannah-like grassland rolled gently down to the choked margins of a river—calm-faced, muddy and secretive. It too seemed astir with inner growings. To the right, more jungle. Behind them, the bland and comforting wall of their compartment.

Above—

It may have been April who saw it first; in any case, Tod always associated the vision with April's scream.

They moved as she screamed, five humans jerked back then like five dolls on a single string, pressed together and to the compartment wall by an overwhelming claustrophobia. They were ants under a descending heel, flies on an anvil ... together their backs struck the wall and they cowered there, looking up.

And it was not descending. It was only—big. It was just that it

was there, over them.

April said, later, that it was like a cloud. Carl would argue that it was cylindrical, with flared ends and a narrow waist. Teague never attempted to describe it, because he disliked inaccuracies, and Moira was too awed to try. To Tod, the object had no shape. It was a luminous opacity between him and the sky, solid, massive as mountains. There was only one thing they agreed on, and that was that it was a ship.

And out of the ship came the golden ones.

They appeared under the ship as speckles of light, and grew in size as they descended, so that the five humans must withstand a second shock; they had known the ship was huge, but had not known until now how very high above them it hung.

Down they came, dozens, hundreds. They filled the sky over the jungle and around the five, moving to make a spherical quadrant from the horizontal to the zenith, a full hundred and eighty degrees from side to side—a radiant floating shell with its concave surface toward, around, above them. They blocked out the sky and the jungle-tops, cut off most of the strange green light, replacing it with their own—for each glowed coolly.

Each individual was distinct and separate. Later, they would argue about the form and shape of the vessel, but the exact shape of these golden things was never even mentioned. Nor did they ever agree on a name for them. To Carl they were an army, to April, angels. Moira called them (secretly) “the seraphim,” and to Tod they were masters. Teague never named them.

For measureless time they hung there, with the humans gaping up at them. There was no flutter of wings, no hum of machinery to indicate how they stayed aloft, and if each individual had a device to keep him afloat, it was of a kind the humans could not recognize. They were beautiful, awesome, uncountable.

And nobody was afraid.

Tod looked from side to side, from top to bottom of this incredible formation, and became aware that it did not touch the ground. Its lower edge was exactly horizontal, at his eye level. Since the hill fell away on all sides, he could see under this lower edge, here the jungle, there down across the savannah to the river. In a new amazement he saw eyes, and protruding heads.

In the tall grass at the jungle margin was a scurry and cease, scurry and cease, as newtlike animals scrambled not quite into

the open and froze, watching. Up in the lower branches of the fleshy, hook-leaved trees, heavy scaly heads of leaf-eaters showed, and here and there was the armed head of a lizard with catlike tearing tusks.

Leather-winged fliers flapped clumsily to rest in the branches, hung for a moment for all the world like broken umbrellas, then achieved balance and folded their pinions. Something slid through the air, almost caught a branch, missed it and tumbled end-over-end to the ground, resolving itself into a broad-headed scaly thing with wide membranes between fore and hind legs. And Tod saw his acquaintance of the night before, with its serrated tail and needle fangs.

And though there must have been eater and eaten there, hunter and hunted, they all watched silently, turned like living compass-needles to the airborne mystery surrounding the humans. They crowded together like a nightmare parody of the Lion and the Lamb, making a constellation, a galaxy of bright and wondering eyes; their distance from each other being, in its way, cosmic.

Tod turned his face into the strange light, and saw one of the golden beings separate from the mass and drift down and forward and stop. Had this living shell been a segment of curving mirror, this one creature would have been at its focal point. For a moment there was complete stillness, a silent waiting. Then the creature made a deep ... *gesture*. Behind it, all the others did the same.

If ten thousand people stand ten thousand meters away, and if, all at once, they kneel, it is hardly possible to see just what it is they have done; yet the aspect of their mass undergoes a definite change. So it was with the radiant shell—it changed, all of it, without moving. There was no mistaking the nature of the change, though its meaning was beyond knowing. It was an obeisance. It was an expression of profound respect, first to the humans themselves, next, and hugely, to something the humans represented. It was unquestionably an act of worship.

And what, thought Tod, could we symbolize to these shining ones? He was a scarab beetle or an Egyptian cat, a Hindu cow or a Teuton tree, told suddenly that it was sacred.

All the while there flooded down the thing which Carl had tried so ineptly to express: *"We're sorry. But it will be all right. You will be glad. You can be glad now."*

At last there was a change in the mighty formation. The center rose and the wings came in, the left one rising and curling to tighten the curve, the right one bending inward without rising. In a moment the formation was a column, a hollow cylinder. It began to rotate slowly, divided into a series of close-set horizontal rings. Alternate rings slowed and stopped and began a counter-rotation, and with a sudden shift, became two interlocked spirals. Still the over-all formation was a hollow cylinder, but now it was composed of an upward and a downward helix.

The individuals spun and swirled down and down, up and up, and kept this motion within the cylinder, and the cylinder quite discrete, as it began to rise. Up and up it lifted, brilliantly, silently, the living original of that which they had found by Alma's body ... up and up, filling the eye and the mind with its complex and controlled ascent, its perfect continuity; for here was a thing with no beginning and no end, all flux and balance where each rising was matched by a fall and each turn by its counterpart.

High, and higher, and at last it was a glowing spot against the hovering shadow of the ship, which swallowed it up. The ship left then, not moving, but fading away like the streamers of an aurora, but faster. In three heartbeats it was there, perhaps it was there, it was gone.

Tod closed his eyes, seeing that dynamic double helix. The tip of his mind was upon it; he trembled on the edge of revelation. He *knew* what that form symbolized. He knew it contained the simple answer to his life and their lives, to this planet and its life and the lives which were brought to it. If a cross is more than an instrument of torture, more than the memento of an event; if the *crux ansata*, the Yin-and-Yang, David's star and all such crystallizations were but symbols of great systems of philosophy, then this dynamic intertwined spiral, this free-flowing, rigidly choreographed symbol was ... was—

Something grunted, something screamed, and the wondrous answer turned and rose spiraling away from him to be gone in three heartbeats. Yet in that moment he knew it was there for him when he had the time, the phasing, the bringing-together of whatever elements were needed. He could not use it yet but he had it. He had it.

Another scream, an immense thrashing all about. The spell was broken and the armistice over. There were chargings and fleeings, cries of death-agony and roaring challenges in and over the jungle, through the grasses to the suddenly boiling river. Life goes on, and death with it, but there must be more death than life when too much life is thrown together.

IV

It may be that their five human lives were saved, in that turbulent reawakening, only by their alienness, for the life around them was cheek-and-jowl with its familiar enemy, its familiar quarry, its familiar food, and there need be no experimenting with the five soft containers of new rich juices standing awestruck with their backs to their intrusive shelter.

Then slowly they met one another's eyes. They cared enough for each other so that there was a gladness of sharing. They cared enough for themselves so that there was also a sheepishness, a troubled self-analysis: *What did I do while I was out of my mind?*

They drew together before the door and watched the chase and slaughter around them as it subsided toward its usual balance of hunting and killing, eating and dying. Their hands began to remember the weapons they held, their minds began to reach for reality.

"They were angels," April said, so softly that no one but Tod heard her. Tod watched her lips tremble and part, and knew that she was about to speak the thing he had almost grasped, but then Teague spoke again, and Tod could see the comprehension fade from her and be gone. "Look! Look there!" said Teague, and moved down the wall to the corner.

What had been an inner compartment of their ship was now an isolated cube, and from its back corner, out of sight until now, stretched another long wall. At regular intervals were doors, each fastened by a simple outside latch of parametal.

Teague stepped to the first door, the others crowding close. Teague listened intently, then stepped back and threw the door open.

Inside was a windowless room, blazing with light. Around the sides, machines were set. Tod instantly recognized their air-cracker, the water-purifiers, the protein-converter and one of the auxiliary power plants. In the center was a generator coupled to a

light-metal fusion motor. The output buses were neatly insulated, coupled through fuseboxes and resistance controls to a "Christmas tree" multiple outlet. Cables ran through the wall to the Coffin compartment and to the line of unexplored rooms to their left.

"They've left us power, at any rate," said Teague. "Let's look down the line."

Fish, Tod snarled silently. Dead man! After what you've just seen you should be on your knees with the weight of it, you should put out your eyes to remember better. But all you can do is take inventory of your nuts and bolts.

Tod looked at the others, at their strained faces and their continual upward glances, as if the bright memory had magnetism for them. He could see the dream fading under Teague's untimely urgency. *You couldn't let us live with it quietly, even for a moment.* Then another inward voice explained to him, *But you see, they killed Alma.*

Resentfully he followed Teague.

Their ship had been dismantled, strung out along the hilltop like a row of shacks. They were interconnected, wired up, re-stacked, ready and reeking with efficiency—the lab, the library, six chambers full of mixed cargo, then—then the noise Teague made was as near to a shout of glee as Tod had ever heard from the man. The door he had just opened showed their instruments inside, all the reference tapes and tools and manuals. There was even a dome in the roof, and the refractor was mounted and waiting.

"April?" Tod looked, looked again. She was gone. "April!"

She emerged from the library, three doors back. "Teague!"

Teague pulled himself away from the array of instruments and went to her. "Teague," she said, "every one of the reels has been read."

"How do you know?"

"None of them are rewind."

Teague looked up and down the row of doors. "That doesn't sound like the way they—" The unfinished sentence was enough. Whoever had built this from their ship's substance worked according to function and with a fine efficiency.

Teague entered the library and picked a tape-reel from its rack. He inserted the free end of film into a slot and pressed a button.

The reel spun and the film disappeared inside the cabinet.

Teague looked up and back. Every single reel was inside out on the clips. "They could have rewound them," said Teague, irritated.

"Maybe they wanted us to know that they'd read them," said Moira.

"Maybe they did," Teague murmured. He picked up a reel, looked at it, picked up another and another. "Music. A play. And here's our personal stuff—behavior film, training records, everything."

Carl said, "Whoever read through all this knows a lot about us."

Teague frowned. "Just us?"

"Who else?"

"Earth," said Teague. "All of it."

"You mean we were captured and analyzed so that whoever they are could get a line on Earth? You think they're going to attack Earth?"

"'You mean ... You think ...' " Teague mimicked coldly. "I mean nothing and I think nothing! Tod, would you be good enough to explain to this impulsive young man what you learned from me earlier? That we need concern ourselves only with evidence?"

Tod shuffled his feet, wishing not to be made an example for anyone, especially Carl, to follow. Carl flushed and tried to smile. Moira took his hand secretly and squeezed it. Tod heard a slight exhalation beside him and looked quickly at April. She was angry. There were times when he wished she would not be angry.

She pointed. "Would you call *that* evidence, Teague?"

They followed her gesture. One of the tape-readers stood open. On its reelshelf stood the counterpart of the strange object they had seen twice before—once, in miniature, found in Alma's Coffin; once again, huge in the sky. This was another of the miniatures.

Teague stared at it, then put out his hand. As his fingers touched it, the pilot-jewel on the tape-reader flashed on, and a soft, clear voice filled the room.

Tod's eyes stung. He had thought he would never hear that voice again. As he listened, he held to the lifeline of April's presence, and felt his lifeline tremble.

Alma's voice said:

"They made some adjustments yesterday with the needle-clusters in my Coffin, so I think they will put me back into it ... Teague, oh Teague, I'm going to die!

"They brought me the recorder just now. I don't know whether it's for their records or for you. If it's for you, then I must tell you ... how can I tell you?

"I've watched them all this time ... how long? Months ... I don't know. I conceived when I awoke, and the babies are coming very soon now; it's been long enough for that; and yet—how can I tell you?

"They boarded us, I don't know how, and I don't know why, nor where ... outside, space is strange, wrong. It's all misty, without stars, crawling with blurs and patches of light.

"They understand me; I'm sure of that—what I say, what I think. I can't understand them at all. They radiate feelings—sorrow, curiosity, confidence, respect. When I began to realize I would die, they gave me a kind of regret. When I broke and cried and said I wanted to be with you, Teague, they reassured me, they said I would. I'm sure that's what they said. But how could that be?

"They are completely dedicated in what they are doing. Their work is a religion to them, and we are part of it. They ... value us, Teague. They didn't just find us. They chose us. It's as if we were the best part of something even they consider great.

"The best ...! Among them I feel like an amoeba. They're beautiful, Teague. Important. Very sure of what they are doing. It's that certainty that makes me believe what I have to believe: I am going to die, and you will live, and you and I will be together. How can that be? How can that be?

"Yet it is true, so believe it with me, Teague. But—find out how!

"Teague, every day they have put a machine on me, radiating. It has to do with the babies. It isn't done to harm them, I'm sure of that. I'm their mother and I'm sure of it. They won't die.

"I will. I can feel their sorrow.

"And I will be with you, and they are joyous about that ..."

"Teague—find out how!"

Tod closed his eyes so that he would not look at Teague, and wished with all his heart that Teague had been alone to hear that ghostly voice. As to what it had said, the words stood as a frame for a picture he could not see, showing him only where it was, not what it meant. Alma's voice had been tremulous and unsure,

but he knew it well enough to know that joy and certitude had lived with her as she spoke. There was wonderment, but no fear.

Knowing that it might be her only message to them, should she not have told them more—facts, figures, measurements?

Then an old, old tale flashed into his mind, an early thing from the ancient Amerenglish, by Hynlen (Henlyne, was it? no matter) about a man who tried to convey to humanity a description of the superbeings who had captured him, with only his body as a tablet and his nails as a stylus. Perhaps he was mad by the time he finished, but his message was clear at least to him: "*Creation took eight days.*" How would he, Tod, describe an association with the ones he had seen in the sky outside, if he had been with them for nearly three hundred days?

April tugged gently at his arm. He turned toward her, still avoiding the sight of Teague. April inclined her shining white head to the door. Moira and Carl already stood outside. They joined them, and waited wordlessly until Teague came out.

When he did, he was grateful, and he need not say so. He came out, a great calm in his face and voice, passed them and let them follow him to his methodical examination of the other compartments, to finish his inventory.

Food stores, cable and conduit, metal and parametal rod and sheet stock, tools and tool-making matrices and dies. A hangar, in which lay their lifeboat, fully equipped.

But there was no long-range communication device, and no parts for one.

And there was no heavy space-drive mechanism, nor tools to make one, nor fuel if they should make the tools.

Back in the instrument room, Carl grunted. "Somebody means for us to stick around."

"The boat—"

Teague said, "I don't think they'd have left us the boat if Earth was in range."

"We'll build a beacon," Tod said suddenly. "We'll get a rescue ship out to us."

"Out where?" asked Teague dryly.

They followed his gaze. Bland and silent, merciless, the decay chronometer stared back at them. Built around a standard radioactive, it had two dials—one which measured the amount of energy radiated by the material, and one which measured the loss

mass. When they checked, the reading was correct. They checked, and the reading was 64.

"Sixty-four years," said Teague. "Assuming we averaged as much as one-half light speed, which isn't likely, we must be thirty light-years away from Earth. Thirty years to get a light-beam there, sixty or more to get a ship back, plus time to make the beacon and time for Earth to understand the signal and prepare a ship ..." He shook his head.

"Plus the fact," Tod said in a strained voice, "that there is no habitable planet in a thirty-year radius from Sol. Except Prime."

Shocked, they gaped silently at this well-known fact. A thousand years of scrupulous search with the best instruments could not have missed a planet like this at such a distance.

"Then the chronometer's wrong!"

"I'm afraid not," said Teague. "It's sixty-four years since we left Earth, and that's that."

"And this planet doesn't exist," said Carl with a sour smile, "and I suppose that is also that."

"Yes, Teague," said Tod. "One of those two facts can't exist with the other."

"They can because they do," said Teague. "There's a missing factor. Can a man breathe underwater, Tod?"

"If he has a diving helmet."

Teague spread his hands. "It took sixty-four years to get to this planet *if*. We have to find the figurative diving helmet." He paused. "The evidence in favor of the planet's existence is fairly impressive," he said wryly. "Let's check the other fact."

"How?"

"The observatory."

They ran to it. The sky glowed its shimmering green, but through it the stars had begun to twinkle. Carl got to the telescope first, put a big hand on the swing-controls, and said, "Where first?" He tugged at the instrument. "Hey!" He tugged again.

"Don't!" said Teague sharply. Carl let go and backed away. Teague switched on the lights and examined the instrument. "It's already connected to the compensators," he said. "Hmp! Our hosts are most helpful." He looked at the setting of the small motors which moved the instrument to cancel diurnal rotation effects. "Twenty-eight hours, thirteen minutes plus. Well, if that's

correct for this planet, it's proof that this isn't Earth or Prime—if we needed proof.” He touched the controls lightly. “Carl, what's the matter here?”

Carl bent to look. There were dabs of dull silver on the threads of the adjusting screws. He touched them. “Parametal,” he said. “Unflashed, but it has adhered enough to jam the threads. Take a couple days to get it off without jarring it. Look here—they've done the same thing with the objective screws!”

“We look at what they want us to see, and like it,” said Tod.

“Maybe it's something we want to see,” said April gently.

Only half-teasing, Tod said, “Whose side are you on, anyway?”

Teague put his eye to the instrument. His hands, by habit, strayed to the focusing adjustment, but found it locked the same way as the others. “Is there a Galactic Atlas?”

“Not in the rack,” said Moira a moment later.

“Here,” said April from the chart table. Awed, she added, “Open.”

Tensely they waited while Teague took his observation and referred to the atlas and to the catalog they found lying under it. When at last he lifted his face from the calculations, it bore the strangest expression Tod had ever seen there.

“Our diving helmet,” he said at last, very slowly, too evenly, “—that is, the factor which rationalizes our two mutually exclusive facts—is simply that our captors have a faster-than-light drive.”

“But according to theory—”

“According to our telescope,” Teague interrupted, “through which I have just seen Sol, and these references so thoughtfully laid out for us ...” Shockingly, his voice broke. He took two deep breaths, and said, “Sol is two-hundred and seventeen light-years away. That sun which set a few minutes ago is Beta Librae.” He studied their shocked faces, one by one. “I don't know what we shall eventually call this place,” he said with difficulty, “but we had better get used to calling it home.”

They called the planet Viridis (“the greenest name I can think of,” Moira said) because none among them had ever seen such a green. It was more than the green of growing, for the sunlight was green-tinged and at night the whole sky glowed green, a green as bright as the brightest silver of Earth's moon, as water

molecules, cracked by the star's intense ultraviolet, celebrated their nocturnal reunion.

They called the moons Wynken, Blynken, and Nod, and the sun they called—the sun.

They worked like slaves, and then like scientists, which is a change of occupation but not a change of pace. They built a palisade of a cypress-like, straight-grained wood, each piece needle-pointed, double-laced with parametal wire. It had a barred gate and peepholes with periscopes and permanent swivel-mounts for the needle-guns they were able to fabricate from tube-stock and spare solenoids. They roofed the enclosure with parametal mesh, which, at one point, could be rolled back to launch the lifeboat.

They buried Alma.

They tested and analyzed, classified, processed, researched everything in the compound and within easy reach of it—soil, vegetation, fauna. They developed an insect-repellent solution to coat the palisade and an insecticide with an automatic spray to keep the compound clear of the creatures, for they were numerous, large, and occasionally downright dangerous, like the “flying caterpillar” which kept its pseudopods in its winged form and enthusiastically broke them off in the flesh of whatever attacked it, leaving an angry rash and suppurating sores. They discovered three kinds of edible seed and another which yielded a fine hydrocarbonic oil much like soy, and a flower whose calyces, when dried and then soaked and broiled, tasted precisely like crabmeat.

For a time they were two separate teams, virtually isolated from each other. Moira and Teague collected minerals and put them through the mass spectroscopy and the radioanalyzers, and it fell to April to classify the life-forms, with Carl and Tod competing mightily to bring in new ones. Or at least photographs of new ones. Two-ton *Parametrodon*, familiarly known as Dopey—a massive herbivore with just enough intelligence to move its jaws—was hardly the kind of thing to be carried home under one's arm, and *Felodon*, the scaly carnivore with catlike tusks, though barely as long as a man, was about as friendly as a half-starved wolverine.

Tetrapodys (Tod called it ‘Umbrellabird’) turned out to be a rewarding catch. They stumbled across a vine which bore foul-

smelling pods; these the clumsy amphibious bats found irresistible. Carl synthesized the evil stuff and improved upon it, and they smeared it on tree-boles by the river. *Tetrapodys* came there by the hundreds and laid eggs apparently in sheer frustration. These eggs were camouflaged by a frilly green membrane, for all the world like the ground-buds of the giant water-fern. The green shoots tasted like shallots and were fine for salad when raw and excellent as onion soup when stewed. The half-hatched *Tetrapodys* yielded ligaments which when dried made excellent self-baited fishhooks. The wing muscles of the adult tasted like veal cutlet with fish sauce, and the inner or main shell of the eggs afforded them an amazing shoe sole—light, tough, and flexible, which, for some unknown reason, *Felodon* would not track.

Pteronauchis, or “flapping frog,” was the gliding newt they had seen on that first day. Largely nocturnal, it was phototropic; a man with strong light could fill a bushel with the things in minutes. Each specimen yielded twice as many, twice as large, and twice as good frog-legs as a Terran frog.

There were no mammals.

There were flowers in profusion—white (a sticky green in that light), purple, brown, blue, and, of course, the ubiquitous green. No red—as a matter of fact, there was virtually no red anywhere on the planet. April’s eyes became a feast for them all. It is impossible to describe the yearning one can feel for an absent color. And so it was that a legend began with them. Twice Tod had seen a bright red growth. The first time he thought it was a mushroom, the second it seemed more of a lichen. The first time it was surrounded by a sea of crusher ants on the move—a fearsome carpet which even *Parametrodon* respected. The second time he had seen it from twenty meters away and had just turned toward it when not one but three *Felodons* came hurtling through the undergrowth at him.

He came back later, both times, and found nothing. And once Carl swore he saw a brilliant red plant move slowly into a rock crevice as he approached. The thing became their *edelweiss*—very nearly their Grail.

Rough diamonds lay in the streambeds and emeralds glinted in the night-glow, and for the Terran-oriented mind there was incalculable treasure to be scratched up just below the steaming

humus: iridium, ruthenium, metallic neptunium 237. There was an unaccountable (at first) shift toward the heavier metals. The ruthenium-rhodium-palladium group was as plentiful on Viridis as the iron-nickel-cobalt series on Earth; cadmium was actually more plentiful here than its relative, zinc. Technetium was present, though rare, on the crust, while Earth's had long since decayed.

Vulcanism was common on Viridis, as could be expected in the presence of so many radioactives. From the lifeboat they had seen bald-spots where there were particularly high concentrations of "hot" material. In some of these there was life.

At the price of a bout of radiation sickness, Carl went into one such area briefly for specimens. What he found was extraordinary—a tree which was warm to the touch, which used minerals and water at a profligate pace, and which, when transplanted outside an environment which destroyed cells almost as fast as they developed, went cancerous, grew enormously, and killed itself with its own terrible viability. In the same lethal areas lived a primitive worm which constantly discarded segments to keep pace with its rapid growth, and which also grew visibly and died of living too fast when taken outside.

The inclination of the planet's axis was less than 2° , so that there were virtually no seasons, and very little variation in temperature from one latitude to another. There were two continents and an equatorial sea, no mountains, no plains, and few large lakes. Most of the planet was gently rolling hill-country and meandering rivers, clothed in thick jungle or grass. The spot where they had awakened was as good as any other, so there they stayed, wandering less and less as they amassed information. Nowhere was there an artifact of any kind, nor any slightest trace of previous habitation. Unless, of course, one considered the existence itself of life on this planet. For Permian life can hardly be expected to develop in less than a billion years; yet the irreproachable calendar inherent in the radioactive bones of Viridis insisted that the planet was no more than thirty-five million years old.

V

When Moira's time came, it went hard with her, and Carl forgot to swagger because he could not help. Teague and April took care

of her, and Tod stayed with Carl, wishing for the right thing to say and not finding it, wanting to do something for this new strange man with Carl's face, and the unsure hands which twisted each other, clawed the ground, wiped cruelly at the scalp, at the shins, restless, terrified. Through Carl, Tod learned a little more of what he never wanted to know—what it must have been like for Teague when he lost Alma.

Alma's six children were toddlers by then, bright and happy in the only world they had ever known. They had been named for moons—Wynken, Blynken and Nod, Rhea, Callisto and Titan. Nod and Titan were the boys, and they and Rhea had Alma's eyes and hair and sometimes Alma's odd, brave stillness—a sort of suspension of the body while the mind went out to grapple and conquer instead of fearing. If the turgid air and the radiant ground affected them, they did not show it, except perhaps in their rapid development.

They heard Moira cry out. It was like laughter, but it was pain. Carl sprang to his feet. Tod took his arm and Carl pulled it away. "Why can't I do something? Do I have to just *sit* here?"

"Shh. She doesn't feel it. That's a tropism. She'll be all right. Sit down, Carl. Tell you what you can do—you can name them. Think. Think of a nice set of names, all connected in some way. Teague used moons. What are you going to—"

"Time enough for that," Carl grunted. "Tod ... do you know what I'll ... I'd be if she—if something happened?"

"Nothing's going to happen."

"I'd just cancel out. I'm not Teague. I couldn't carry it. How does Teague do it?..." Carl's voice lapsed to a mumble.

"Names," Tod reminded him. "Seven, eight of 'em. Come on, now."

"Think she'll have eight?"

"Why not? She's normal." He nudged Carl. "Think of names. I know! How many of the old signs of the zodiac would make good names?"

"Don't remember 'em."

"I do. Aries, that's good. Taurus. Gem—no; you wouldn't want to call a child 'Twins.' Leo—that's *fine*!"

"Libra," said Carl, "for a girl. Aquarius, Sagittarius—how many's that?"

Tod counted on his fingers. "Six. Then, Virgo and Capricorn.

And you're all set!" But Carl wasn't listening. In two long bounds he reached April, who was just stepping into the compound. She looked tired. She looked more than tired. In her beautiful eyes was a great pity, the color of a bleeding heart.

"Is she all right? Is she?" They were hardly words, those hoarse, rushed things.

April smiled with her lips, while her eyes poured pity. "Yes, yes, she'll be all right. It wasn't too bad."

Carl whooped and pushed past her. She caught his arm, and for all her frailty, swung him around.

"Not yet, Carl. Teague says to tell you first—"

"The babies? What about them? How many, April?"

April looked over Carl's shoulder at Tod. She said, "Three."

Carl's face relaxed, numb, and his eyes went round. "Th—what? Three so far, you mean. There'll surely be more ..."

She shook her head.

Tod felt the laughter explode within him, and he clamped his jaws on it. It surged at him, hammered in the back of his throat. And then he caught April's pleading eyes. He took strength from her, and bottled up a great bray of merriment.

Carl's voice was the last fraying thread of hope. "The others died, then."

She put a hand on his cheek. "There were only three. Carl ... don't be mean to Moira."

"Oh, I won't," he said with difficulty. "She couldn't ... I mean it wasn't her doing." He flashed a quick, defensive look at Tod, who was now glad he had controlled himself. What was in Carl's face meant murder for anyone who dared laugh.

April said, "Not your doing either, Carl. It's this planet. It must be."

"Thanks, April," Carl muttered. He went to the door, stopped, shook himself like a big dog. He said again, "Thanks," but this time his voice didn't work and it was only a whisper. He went inside.

Tod bolted for the corner of the building, whipped around it and sank to the ground, choking. He held both hands over his mouth and laughed until he hurt. When at last he came to a limp silence, he felt April's presence. She stood quietly watching him, waiting.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. But ... it is funny."

She shook her head gravely. "We're not on Earth, Tod. A new world means new manners, too. That would apply even on Terra Prime if we'd gone there."

"I suppose," he said, and then repressed another giggle.

"I always thought it was a silly kind of joke anyway," she said primly. "Judging virility by the size of a brood. There isn't any scientific basis for it. Men are silly. They used to think that virility could be measured by the amount of hair on their chests, or how tall they were. There's nothing wrong with having only three."

"Carl?" grinned Tod. "The big ol' swashbuckler?" He let the grin fade. "All right, Ape. I won't let Carl see me laugh. Or you either. All right?" A peculiar expression crossed his face. "What was that you said? April! Men never had hair on their chests!"

"Yes, they did. Ask Teague."

"I'll take your word for it." He shuddered. "I can't imagine it unless a man had a tail too. And bony ridges over his eyes."

"It wasn't so long ago that they had. The ridges, anyway. Well—I'm glad you didn't laugh in front of him. You're nice, Tod."

"You're nice too." He pulled her down beside him and hugged her gently. "Bet you'll have a dozen."

"I'll try." She kissed him.

When specimen-hunting had gone as far as it could, classification became the settlement's main enterprise. And gradually, the unique pattern of Viridian life began to emerge.

Viridis had its primitive fish and several of the mollusca, but the fauna was primarily arthropods and reptiles. The interesting thing about each of the three branches was the close relationship between species. It was almost as if evolution took a major step with each generation, instead of bumbling along as on Earth, where certain stages of development are static for thousands, millions of years. *Pterodon*, for example, existed in three varieties, the simplest of which showed a clear similarity to *pteronachis*, the gliding newt. A simple salamander could be shown to be the common ancestor of both the flapping frog and massive *Parametrodon*, and there were strong similarities between this salamander and the worm which fathered the arthropods.

They lived close to the truth for a long time without being able

to see it, for man is conditioned to think of evolution from simple to complex, from ooze to animalcule to mollusc to ganoid; amphibid to monotreme to primate to tinker ... losing the significance of the fact that all these co-exist. Was the vertebrate eel of prehistory a *higher* form of life than his simpler descendant? The whale lost his legs; this men call recidivism, a sort of backsliding in evolution, and treat it as a kind of illegitimacy.

Men are oriented out of simplicity toward the complex, and make of the latter a goal. Nature treats complex matters as expedencies and so is never confused. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Viridis colony took so long to discover their error, for the weight of evidence was in error's favor. There was indeed an unbroken line from the lowest forms of life to the highest, and to assume that they had a common ancestor was a beautifully consistent hypothesis, of the order of accuracy an archer might display in hitting dead center, from a thousand paces, a bowstring with the nock of his arrow.

The work fell more and more on the younger ones. Teague isolated himself, not by edict, but by habit. It was assumed that he was working along his own lines; and then it became usual to proceed without him, until finally he was virtually a hermit in their midst. He was aging rapidly; perhaps it hurt something in him to be surrounded by so much youth. His six children thrived, and, with Carl's three, ran naked in the jungle armed only with their sticks and their speed. They were apparently immune to practically everything Viridis might bring against them, even *Crotalidus's* fangs, which gave them the equivalent of a severe bee-sting (as opposed to what had happened to Moira once, when they had had to reactivate one of the Coffins to keep her alive).

Tod would come and sit with him sometimes, and as long as there was no talk the older man seemed to gain something from the visits. But he preferred to be alone, living as much as he could with memories for which not even a new world could afford a substitute.

Tod said to Carl, "Teague is going to wither up and blow away if we can't interest him in something."

"He's interested enough to spend a lot of time with whatever he's thinking about," Carl said bluntly.

"But I'd like it better if he was interested in something here, now. I wish we could ... I wish—" But he could think of nothing,

and it was a constant trouble to him.

Little Titan was killed, crushed under a great clumsy *Parametrodon* which slid down a bank on him while the child was grubbing for the scarlet cap of the strange red mushroom they had glimpsed from time to time. It was in pursuit of one of these that Moira had been bitten by the *Crotalidus*. One of Carl's children was drowned—just how, no one knew. Aside from these tragedies, life was easy and interesting. The compound began to look more like a *kraal* as they acclimated, for although the adults never adapted as well as the children, they did become far less sensitive to insect bites and the poison weeds which first troubled them.

It was Teague's son Nod who found what was needed to bring Teague's interest back, at least for a while. The child came back to the compound one day, trailed by two slinking *Felodons* who did not catch him because they kept pausing and pausing to lap up gouts of blood which marked his path. Nod's ear was torn and he had a green-stick break in his left ulna, and a dislocated wrist. He came weeping, weeping tears of joy. He shouted as he wept, great proud noises. Once in the compound, he collapsed, but he would not lose consciousness, nor his grip on his prize, until Teague came. Then he handed Teague the mushroom and fainted.

The mushroom was and was not like anything on Earth. Earth has a fungus called *schizophyllum*, not uncommon but most strange. Though not properly a fungus, the red "mushroom" of Viridis had many of the functions of *schizophyllum*.

Schizophyllum produces spores of four distinct types, each of which grows into a genetically distinct, completely dissimilar plant. Three of these are sterile. The fourth produces *schizophyllum*.

The red mushroom of Viridis also produced four distinct heterokaryons or genetically different types, and the spores of one of these produced the mushroom.

Teague spent an engrossing earth-year in investigating the other three.

VI

Sweating and miserable in his integument of flexskin, Tod hunched in the crotch of a finger-tree. His knees were drawn up

and his head was down; his arms clasped his shins and he rocked slightly back and forth. He knew he would be safe here for some time—the fleshy fingers of the tree were clumped at the slender, swaying ends of the branches and never turned back toward the trunk. He wondered what it would be like to be dead. Perhaps he would be dead soon, and then he'd know. He might as well be.

The names he'd chosen were perfect and all of a family: Sol, Mercury, Venus, Terra, Mars, Jupiter ... eleven of them. And he could think of a twelfth if he had to.

For what?

He let himself sink down again into the blackness wherein nothing lived but the oily turning of *what's it like to be dead?*

Quiet, he thought. *No one would laugh.*

Something pale moved on the jungle floor below him. He thought instantly of April, and angrily put the thought out of his mind. April would be sleeping now, having completed the trifling task it had taken her so long to start. Down there, that would be Blynken, or maybe Rhea. They were very alike.

It didn't matter, anyway.

He closed his eyes and stopped rocking. He couldn't see anyone, no one could see him. That was the best way. So he sat, and let time pass, and when a hand lay on his shoulder, he nearly leaped out of the tree. "Damn it, Blynken—"

"It's me. Rhea." The child, like all of Alma's daughters, was large for her age and glowing with health. How long had it been? Six, eight ... nine Earth years since they had landed.

"Go hunt mushrooms," Tod growled. "Leave me alone."

"Come back," said the girl.

Tod would not answer. Rhea knelt beside him, her arm around the primary branch, her back, with his, against the trunk. She bent her head and put her cheek against his. "Tod."

Something inside him flamed. He bared his teeth and swung a heavy fist. The girl doubled up soundlessly and slipped out of the tree. He stared down at the lax body and at first could not see it for the haze of fury which blew and whirled around him. Then his vision cleared and he moaned, tossed his club down and dropped after it. He caught up the club and whacked off the tree-fingers which probed toward them. He swept up the child and leapt clear, and sank to his knees, gathering her close.

"Rhea, I'm sorry, I'm sorry ... I wasn't ... I'm not—*Rhea!* Don't

be dead!"

She stirred and made a tearing sound with her throat. Her eyelids trembled and opened, uncovering her pain-blinded eyes. "Rhea!"

"It's all right," she whispered, "I shouldn't've bothered you. Do you want me to go away?"

"No," he said. "No." He held her tight. *Why not let her go away?* a part of him wondered, and another part, frightened and puzzled, cried, *No! No!* He had an urgent, half-hysterical need to explain. *Why explain to her, a child? Say you're sorry, comfort her, heal her, but don't expect her to understand.* Yet he said, "I can't go back. There's nowhere else to go. So what can I do?"

Rhea was quiet, as if waiting. A terrible thing, a wonderful thing, to have someone you have hurt wait patiently like that while you find a way to explain. Even if you only explain it to yourself ... "What could I do if I went back? They—they'll never—they'll laugh at me. They'll all laugh. They're laughing now." Angry again, plaintive no more, he blurted, "April! *Damn April!* She's made a eunuch out of me!"

"Because she had only one baby?"

"Like a savage."

"It's a beautiful baby. A boy."

"A man, a real man, fathers six or eight."

She met his eyes gravely. "That's silly."

"What's happening to us on this crazy planet?" he raged. "Are we evolving backward? What comes next—one of you kids hatching out some amphibids?"

She said only, "Come back, Tod."

"I can't," he whispered. "They'll think I'm ... that I can't ..." Helplessly, he shrugged. "They'll laugh."

"Not until you do, and then they'll laugh *with* you. Not at you, Tod."

Finally, he said it, "April won't love me; she'll never love a weakling."

She pondered, holding him with her clear gaze. "You really need to be loved a whole lot."

Perversely, he became angry again. "I can get along!" he snapped.

And she smiled and touched the nape of his neck. "You're

loved,” she assured him. “Gee, you don’t have to be mad about that. I love you, don’t I? April loves you. Maybe I love you even more than she does. She loves everything you are, Tod. I love everything you ever were and everything you ever will be.”

He closed his eyes and a great music came to him. A long, long time ago he had attacked someone who came to comfort him, and she had let him cry, and at length she had said ... not exactly these words, but—it was the same.

“Rhea.”

He looked at her. “You said all that to me before.”

A puzzled small crinkle appeared between her eyes and she put her fingers on it. “Did I?”

“Yes,” said Tod, “but it was before you were even born.”

He rose and took her hand, and they went back to the compound, and whether he was laughed at or not he never knew, for he could think of nothing but his full heart and of April. He went straight in to her and kissed her gently and admired his son, whose name was Sol, and who had been born with hair and two tiny incisors, and who had heavy bony ridges over his eyes ...

“A fantastic storage capacity,” Teague remarked, touching the top of the scarlet mushroom. “The spores are almost microscopic. The thing doesn’t seem to want them distributed, either. It positively hoards them, millions of them.”

“Start over, please,” April said. She shifted the baby in her arms. He was growing prodigiously. “Slowly. I used to know something about biology—or so I thought. But *this*—”

Teague almost smiled. It was good to see. The aging face had not had so much expression in it in five Earth-years. “I’ll get as basic as I can, then, and start from there. First of all, we call this thing a mushroom, but it isn’t. I don’t think it’s a plant, though you couldn’t call it an animal, either.”

“I don’t think anybody ever told me the real difference between a plant and an animal,” said Tod.

“Oh ... well, the most convenient way to put it—it’s not strictly accurate, but it will do—is that plants make their own food and animals subsist on what others have made. This thing does both. It has roots, but—” he lifted an edge of the skirted stem of the mushroom—“it can move them. Not much, not fast; but if it wants to shift itself, it can.”

April smiled, “Tod, I’ll give you basic biology any time. Do go on, Teague.”

“Good. Now, I explained about the heterokaryons—the ability this thing has to produce spores which grow up into four completely different plants. One is a mushroom just like this. Here are the other three.”

Tod looked at the box of plants. “Are they really all from the mushroom spores?”

“Don’t blame you,” said Teague, and actually chuckled. “I didn’t believe it myself at first. A sort of pitcher plant, half full of liquid. A thing like a cactus. And this one. It’s practically all underground, like a truffle, although it has these cilia. You wouldn’t think it was anything but a few horsehairs stuck in the ground.”

“And they’re all sterile,” Tod recalled.

“They’re not,” said Teague, “and that’s what I called you in here to tell you. They’ll yield if they are fertilized.”

“Fertilized how?”

Instead of answering, Teague asked April, “Do you remember how far back we traced the evolution of Viridian life?”

“Of course. We got the arthropods all the way back to a simple segmented worm. The insects seemed to come from another worm, with pseudopods and a hard carapace.”

“A caterpillar,” Tod interpolated.

“Almost,” said April, with a scientist’s nicety. “And the most primitive reptile we could find was a little gymnoderm you could barely see without a glass.”

“Where did we find it?”

“Swimming around in—oh! In those pitcher plant things!”

“If you won’t take my word for this,” said Teague, a huge enjoyment glinting between his words, “you’ll just have to breed these things yourself. It’s a lot of work, but this is what you’ll discover.

“An adult gymnoderm—a male—finds this pitcher and falls in. There’s plenty of nutriment for him, you know, and he’s a true amphibian. He fertilizes the pitcher. Nodules grow under the surface of the liquid inside there—” he pointed “—and bud off. The buds are mobile. They grow into wrigglers, miniature tadpoles. Then into lizards. They climb out and go about the business of being—well, lizards.”

"All males?" asked Tod.

"No," said Teague, "and that's an angle I haven't yet investigated. But apparently some males breed with females, which lay eggs, which hatch into lizards, and some find plants to fertilize. Anyway, it looks as if this plant is actually the progenitor of all the reptiles here; you know how clear the evolutionary lines are to all the species."

"What about the truffle with the horsehairs?" asked Tod.

"A pupa," said Teague, and to the incredulous expression on April's face, he insisted, "Really—a pupa. After nine weeks or so of dormance, it hatches out into what you almost called a caterpillar."

"And then into all the insects here," said April, and shook her head in wonderment. "And I suppose that cactus-thing hatches out the nematodes, the segmented ones that evolve into arthropods?"

Teague nodded. "You're welcome to experiment," he said again, "but believe me—you'll only find out I'm right; it really happens."

"Then this scarlet mushroom is the beginning of everything here."

"I can't find another theory," said Teague.

"I can," said Tod.

They looked at him questioningly, and he rose and laughed. "Not yet. I have to think it through." He scooped up the baby and then helped April to her feet. "How do you like our Sol, Teague?"

"Fine," said Teague. "A fine boy." Tod knew he was seeing the heavy occipital ridges, the early teeth, and saying nothing. Tod was aware of a faint inward surprise as the baby reached toward April and he handed him over. He should have resented what might be in Teague's mind, but he did not. The beginnings of an important insight welcomed criticism of the child, recognized its hairiness, its savagery, and found these things good. But as yet the thought was too nebulous to express, except by a smile. He smiled, took April's hand, and left.

"That was a funny thing you said to Teague," April told him as they walked toward their quarters.

"Remember, April, the day we landed? Remember—" he made a gesture that took in a quadrant of sky—"Remember how we all felt ... good?"

"Yes," she murmured. "It was like a sort of compliment, and a reassurance. How could I forget?"

"Yes. Well ..." He spoke with difficulty but his smile stayed. "I have a thought, and it makes me feel like that. But I can't get it into words," After a thoughtful pause, he added, "Yet."

She shifted the baby. "He's getting so heavy."

"I'll take him." He took the squirming bundle with the deep-set, almost humorous eyes. When he looked up from them, he caught an expression on April's face which he hadn't seen in years. "What is it, Ape?"

"You—*like* him."

"Well, sure."

"I was afraid. I was afraid for a long time that you ... he's ours, but he isn't exactly a pretty baby."

"I'm not exactly a pretty father."

"You know how precious you are to me?" she whispered.

He knew, for this was an old intimacy between them. He laughed and followed the ritual: "How precious?"

She cupped her hands and brought them together, to make of them an ivory box. She raised the hands and peeped into them, between the thumbs, as if at a rare jewel, then clasped the magic tight and hugged it to her breast, raising tear-filled eyes to him. "That precious," she breathed.

He looked at the sky, seeing somewhere in it the many peak mountains of their happiness when she made that gesture, feeling how each one, meticulously chosen, brought all the others back. "I used to hate this place," he said. "I guess it's changed."

"You've changed."

Changed how? he wondered. He felt the same, even though he knew he looked older ...

The years passed, and the children grew. When Sol was fifteen Earth-years old, short, heavy-shouldered, powerful, he married Carl's daughter Libra. Teague, turning to parchment, had returned to his hermitage from the temporary stimulation of his researches on what they still called "the mushroom." More and more the colony lived off the land and out of the jungle, not because there was any less to be synthesized from their compact machines; but out of preference; it was easier to catch flapping frogs or umbrella-birds and cook them than to bother with

machine settings and check-analyses, and, somehow, a lot more fun to eat them, too.

It seemed to them safer, year by year. *Felodon*, unquestionably the highest form of life on Viridis, was growing scarce, being replaced by a smaller, more timid carnivore April called *Vulpidus* (once, for it seemed not to matter much any more about keeping records) and everyone ultimately called “fox,” for all the fact that it was a reptile. *Pterodon* was disappearing too, as were all the larger forms. More and more they strayed after food, not famine-driven, but purely for variety; more and more they found themselves welcome and comfortable away from the compound. Once Carl and Moira drifted off for nearly a year. When they came back they had another child—a silent, laughing little thing with oddly long arms and heavy teeth.

The warm days and the glowing nights passed comfortably and the stars no longer called. Tod became a grandfather and was proud. The child, a girl, was albino like April, and had exactly April’s deep red eyes. Sol and Libra named her Emerald, a green name and a ground-term rather than a sky-term, as if in open expression of the slow spell worked on them all by Viridis. She was mute—but so were almost all the new children, and it seemed not to matter. They were healthy and happy.

Tod went to tell Teague, thinking it might cheer the old one up a little. He found him lying in what had once been his laboratory, thin and placid and disinterested, absently staring down at one of the arthropodal flying creatures that had once startled them so by zooming into the Coffin chamber. This one had happened to land on Teague’s hand, and Teague was laxly waiting for it to fly off again, out through the unscreened window, past the unused sprays, over the faint tumble of rotted spars which had once been a palisade.

“Teague, the baby’s come!”

Teague sighed, his tired mind detaching itself from memory episode by episode. His eyes rolled toward Tod and finally he turned his head. “Which one would that be?”

Tod laughed. “My grandchild, a girl. Sol’s baby.”

Teague let his lids fall. He said nothing.

“Well, aren’t you glad?”

Slowly a frown came to the papery brow. “Glad.” Tod felt he was looking at the word as he had stared at the arthropod,

wondering limply when it might go away. "What's the matter with it?"

"What?"

Teague sighed again, a weary, impatient sound. "What does it look like?" he said slowly, emphasizing each one-syllabled word.

"Like April. Just like April."

Teague half sat up, and blinked at Tod. "You don't mean it."

"Yes, eyes red as—" The image of an Earth sunset flickered near his mind but vanished as too hard to visualize. Tod pointed at the four red-capped "mushrooms" that had stood for so many years in the test-boxes in the laboratory. "Red as those."

"Silver hair," said Teague.

"Yes, beau—"

"All over," said Teague flatly.

"Well, yes."

Teague let himself fall back on the cot and gave a disgusted snort. "A monkey."

"*Teague!*"

"Ah-h-h ... go 'way," growled the old man. "I long ago resigned myself to what was happening to us here. A human being just can't adapt to the kind of radioactive ruin this place is for us. Your monsters'll breed monsters, and the monsters'll do the same if they can, until pretty soon they just won't breed any more. And that will be the end of that, and good riddance ..." His voice faded away. His eyes opened, looking on distant things, and gradually found themselves focused on the man who stood over him in shocked silence. "But the one thing I can't stand is to have somebody come in here saying, 'Oh, joy, oh happy day!' "

"Teague ..." Tod swallowed heavily.

"Viridis eats ambition; there was going to be a city here," said the old man indistinctly. "Viridis eats humanity; there were going to be people here." He chuckled gruesomely. "All right, all right, accept it if you have to—and you have to. But don't come around here celebrating."

Tod backed to the door, his eyes horror-round, then turned and fled.

VII

April held him as he crouched against the wall, rocked him slightly, made soft unspellable mother-noises to him.

"Shh, he's all decayed, all lonesome and mad," she murmured. "Shh. Shh."

Tod felt half-strangled. As a youth he had been easily moved, he recalled; he had that tightness of the throat for sympathy, for empathy, for injustices he felt the Universe was hurling at him out of its capacious store. But recently life had been placid, full of love and togetherness and a widening sense of membership with the earth and the air and all the familiar things which walked and flew and grew and bred in it. And his throat was shaped for laughter now; these feelings hurt him.

"But he's right," he whispered. "Don't you see? Right from the beginning it ... it was ... remember Alma had six children, April? And a little later, Carl and Moira had three? And you, only one ... how long is it since the average human gave birth to only one?"

"They used to say it was humanity's last major mutation," she admitted, "Multiple births ... these last two thousand years. But —"

"Eyebrow ridges," he interrupted. "Hair ... that skull, Emerald's skull, slanting back like that; did you see the tusks on that little ... *baboon* of Moira's?"

"Tod! *Don't!*"

He leaped to his feet, sprang across the room and snatched the golden helix from the shelf where it had gleamed its locked symbolism down on them ever since the landing. "Around and down!" he shouted. "Around and around and down!" He squatted beside her and pointed furiously. "Down and down into the blackest black there is; down into *nothing*." He shook his fist at the sky. "You see what they do? They find the highest form of life they can and plant it here and watch it slide down into the muck!" He hurled the artifact away from him.

"But it goes up too, round and up. Oh, Tod!" she cried. "Can you remember them, what they looked like, the way they flew, and say these things about them?"

"I can remember Alma," he gritted, "conceiving and gestating alone in space, while they turned their rays on her every day. You know *why*?" With the sudden thought, he stabbed a finger down at her. "To give her babies a head-start on Viridis, otherwise they'd have been born normal here; it would've taken another couple of generations to start them downhill, and they wanted us

all to go together.”

“No, Tod, no!”

“Yes, April, yes. How much proof do you need?” He whirled on her. “Listen—remember that mushroom Teague analyzed? He had to *pry* spores out of it to see what it yielded. Remember the three different plants he got? Well, I was just there; I don’t know how many times before I’ve seen it, but only now it makes sense. He’s got four mushrooms now; do you see? Do you see? Even back as far as we can trace the bugs and newts on this green hell-pit, Viridis won’t let anything climb; it must fall.”

“I don’t—”

“You’ll give me basic biology any time,” he quoted sarcastically. “Let me tell you some biology. That mushroom yields three plants, and the plants yield animal life. Well, when the animal life fertilized those heterowhatever—”

“Heterokaryons.”

“Yes. Well, you don’t get animals that can evolve and improve. You get one pitiful generation of animals which breeds back into a mushroom, and there it sits hoarding its spores. Viridis wouldn’t let one puny newt, one primitive pupa build! It snatches ’em back, locks ’em up. That mushroom isn’t the beginning of everything here—it’s *the end!*”

April got to her feet slowly, looking at Tod as if she had never seen him before, not in fear, but with a troubled curiosity. She crossed the room and picked up the artifact, stroked its gleaming golden coils. “You could be right,” she said in a low voice. “But that can’t be all there is to it.” She set the helix back in its place. “They *wouldn’t*.”

She spoke with such intensity that for a moment that metrical formation, mighty and golden, rose again in Tod’s mind, up and up to the measureless cloud which must be a ship. He recalled the sudden shift, like a genuflection, directed at them, at *him*, and for that moment he could find no evil in it. Confused, he tossed his head, found himself looking out the door, seeing Moira’s youngest ambling comfortably across the compound.

“They *wouldn’t*?” he snarled. He took April’s slender arm and whirled her to the door. “You know what I’d do before I’d father another one like *that*?” He told her specifically what he would do. “A lemur next, hm? A spider, an oyster, a jellyfish!”

April whimpered and ran out. "Know any lullabies to a tapeworm?" he roared after her. She disappeared into the jungle, and he fell back, gasping for breath ...

Having no stomach for careful thought nor careful choosing, having Teague for an example to follow, Tod too turned hermit. He could have survived the crisis easily perhaps, with April to help, but she did not come back. Moira and Carl were off again, wandering; the children lived their own lives, and he had no wish to see Teague. Once or twice Sol and Libra came to see him, but he snarled at them and they left him alone. It was no sacrifice. Life on Viridis was very full for the contented ones.

He sulked in his room or poked about the compound by himself. He activated the protein converter once, but found its products tasteless, and never bothered with it again. Sometimes he would stand near the edge of the hilltop and watch the children playing in the long grass, and his lip would curl.

Damn Teague! He'd been happy enough with Sol all those years, for all the boy's bulging eyebrow ridges and hairy body. He had been about to accept the silent, silver Emerald, too, when the crotchety old man had dropped his bomb. Once or twice Tod wondered detachedly what it was in him that was so easily reached, so completely insecure, that the suggestion of abnormality should strike so deep.

Somebody once said, *"You really need to be loved, don't you, Tod?"*

No one would love this tainted thing, father of savages who spawned animals. He didn't deserve to be loved.

He had never felt so alone. *"I'm going to die. But I will be with you too."* That had been Alma. Huh! There was old Teague, tanning his brains in his own sour acids. Alma had believed something or other ... and what had come of it? That wizened old crab lolling his life away in the lab.

Tod spent six months that way.

"Tod!" He came out of sleep reluctantly, because in sleep an inner self still lived with April where there was no doubt and no fury; no desertion, no loneliness.

He opened his eyes and stared dully at the slender figure

silhouetted against Viridis's glowing sky. "April?"

"Moira," said the figure. The voice was cold.

"Moira!" he said, sitting up. "I haven't seen you for a year. More. Wh—"

"Come," she said. "Hurry."

"Come where?"

"Come by yourself or I'll get Carl and he'll carry you." She walked swiftly to the door.

He reeled after her. "You can't come in here and—"

"Come on." The voice was edged and slid out from between clenched teeth. A miserable part of him twitched in delight and told him that he was important enough to be hated. He despised himself for recognizing the twisted thought, and before he knew what he was doing he was following Moira at a steady trot.

"Where are—" he gasped, and she said over her shoulder, "If you don't talk you'll go faster."

At the jungle margin a shadow detached itself and spoke. "Got him?"

"Yes, Carl."

The shadow became Carl. He swung in behind Tod, who suddenly realized that if he did not follow the leader, the one behind would drive. He glanced back at Carl's implacable bulk, and then put down his head and jogged doggedly along as he was told.

They followed a small stream, crossed it on a fallen tree, and climbed a hill. Just as Tod was about to accept the worst these determined people might offer in exchange for a moment to ease his fiery lungs, Moira stopped. He stumbled into her. She caught his arm and kept him on his feet.

"In there," she said, pointing.

"A finger tree."

"You know how to get inside," Carl growled.

Moira said, "She begged me not to tell you, ever. I think she was wrong."

"Who? What is—"

"Inside," said Carl, and shoved him roughly down the slope.

His long conditioning was still with him, and reflexively he sidestepped the fanning fingers which swayed to meet him. He ducked under them, batted aside the inner phalanx, and found himself in the clear space underneath. He stopped there, gasping.

Something moaned.

He bent, fumbled cautiously in the blackness. He touched something smooth and alive, recoiled, touched it again. A foot.

Someone began to cry harshly, hurtfully, the sound exploding as if through clenched hands.

"April!"

"I told them not to ..." and she moaned.

"April, what is it, what's happened?"

"You needn't ... be," she said, sobbed a while, and went on, "... angry. It didn't live."

"What didn't ... you mean you ... April, you—"

"It wouldn't've been a tapeworm," she whispered.

"Who—" he fell to his knees, found her face. "When did you—"

"I was going to tell you that day, that very same day, and when you came in so angry at what Teague told you, I specially wanted to, I thought you'd ... be glad."

"April, why didn't you come back? If I'd known ..."

"You said what you'd do if I ever ... if you ever had another ... you meant it, Tod."

"It's this place, this Viridis," he said sadly. "I went crazy."

He felt her wet hand on his cheek.

"It's all right. I just didn't want to make it worse for you," April said.

"I'll take you back."

"No, you can't. I've been ... I've lost a lot of ... just stay with me a little while."

"Moirra should have—"

"She just found me," said April. "I've been alone all the—I guess I made a noise. I didn't mean to. Tod ... don't quarrel. Don't go into a lot of ... It's all right."

Against her throat he cried. "*All right!*"

"When you're by yourself," she said faintly, "you think; you think better. Did you ever think of—"

"April!" he cried in anguish, the very sound of her pale, pain-wracked voice making this whole horror real.

"Shh, sh. Listen," she said rapidly. "There isn't time, you know, Tod. Tod, did you ever think of us all, Teague and Alma and Moirra and Carl and us, what we are?"

"I know what I am."

"*Shh*. Altogether we're a leader and mother; a word and a shield; a doubter, a mystic ..." Her voice trailed off. She coughed and he could feel the spastic jolt shoot through her body. She panted lightly for a moment and went on urgently. "Anger and prejudice and stupidity, courage, laughter, love, music ... it was all aboard that ship and it's all here on Viridis. Our children and theirs—no matter what they look like, Tod, no matter how they live or what they eat—they have that in them. Humanity isn't just a way of walking, merely a kind of skin. It's what we had together and what we gave Sol. It's what the golden ones found in us and wanted for Viridis. You'll see. You'll see."

"Why Viridis?"

"Because of what Teague said—what you said." Her breath puffed out in the ghost of a laugh. "Basic biology ... ontogeny follows phylogeny. The human foetus is a cell, an animalcule, a gilled amphibian ... all up the line. It's there in us; Viridis makes it go backward."

"To what?"

"The mushroom. The spores. We'll be spores, Tod. Together ... Alma *said* she could be dead, and together with Teague! That's why I said ... it's all right. This doesn't matter, what's happened. We live in Sol, we live in Emerald with Carl and Moira, you see? Closer, nearer than we've ever been."

Tod took a hard hold on his reason. "But back to spores—why? What then?"

She sighed. It was unquestionably a happy sound. "They'll be back for the reaping, and they'll have us, Tod, all we are and all they worship: goodness and generosity and the urge to build: mercy; kindness."

"They're needed too," she whispered. "And the spores make mushrooms, and the mushrooms make the heterokaryons; and from those, away from Viridis, come the life-forms to breed us—us, Tod! into whichever form is dominant. And there we'll be, that flash of old understanding of a new idea ... the special pressure on a painter's hand that makes him a Rembrandt, the sense of architecture that turns a piano player into a Bach. Three billion extra years of evolution, ready to help wherever it can be used. On every Earth-type planet, Tod—millions of us, blowing about in the summer wind, waiting to give ..."

"Give! Give what Teague is now, rotten and angry?"

"That isn't Teague. That will die off. Teague lives with Alma in their children, and in theirs ... she *said* she'd be with him!"

"Me ... what about me?" he breathed. "What I did to you ..."

"Nothing, you did nothing. You live in Sol, in Emerald. Living, conscious, alive ... with me ..."

He said, "You mean ... you could talk to me from Sol?"

"I think I might." With his forehead, bent so close to her, he felt her smile. "But I don't think I would. Lying so close to you, why should I speak to an outsider?"

Her breathing changed and he was suddenly terrified. "April, don't die."

"I won't," she said. "Alma didn't." She kissed him gently and died.

It was a long darkness, with Tod hardly aware of roaming and raging through the jungle, of eating without tasting, of hungering without knowing of it. Then there was a twilight, many months long, soft and still, with restfulness here and a promise soon. Then there was the compound again, found like a dead memory, learned again just a little more readily than something new. Carl and Moira were kind, knowing the nature of justice and the limits of punishment, and at last Tod was alive again.

He found himself one day down near the river, watching it and thinking back without fear of his own thoughts, and a growing wonder came to him. His mind had for so long dwelt on his own evil that it was hard to break new paths. He wondered with an awesome effort what manner of creatures might worship humanity for itself, and what manner of creatures humans were to be so worshipped. It was a totally new concept to him, and he was completely immersed in it, so that when Emerald slid out of the grass and stood watching him, he was frightened and shouted.

She did not move. There was little to fear now on Viridis. All the large reptiles were gone, and there was room for the humans, the humanoids, the primates, the ... children. In his shock the old reflexes played. He stared at her, her square stocky body, the silver hair which covered it all over except for the face, the palms, the soles of the feet. "*A monkey!*" he spat, in Teague's tones, and the shock turned to shame. He met her eyes, April's deep glowing rubies, and they looked back at him without fear.

He let a vision of April grow and fill the world. The child's rare red eyes helped (there was so little, so very little red on Viridis). He saw April at the spaceport, holding him in the dark shadows of the blockhouse while the sky flamed above them. *We'll go out like that soon, soon, Tod. Squeeze me, squeeze me ...* Ah, he'd said, *who needs a ship?*

Another April, part of her in a dim light as she sat writing; her hair, a crescent of light loving her cheek, a band of it on her brow; then she had seen him and turned, rising, smothered his first word with her mouth. Another April wanting to smile, waiting; and April asleep, and once April sobbing because she could not find a special word to tell him what she felt for him ... He brought his mind back from her in the past, from her as she was, alive in his mind, back to here, to the bright mute with the grave red eyes who stood before him, and he said, "How precious?"

The baby kept her eyes on his, and slowly raised her silken hands. She cupped them together to make a closed chamber, looked down at it, opened her hands slightly and swiftly to peer inside, rapt at what she pretended to see; closed her hands again to capture the treasure, whatever it was, and hugged it to her breast. She looked up at him slowly, and her eyes were full of tears, and she was smiling.

He took his grandchild carefully in his arms and held her gently and strongly. Monkey?

"April," he gasped. "Little Ape. Little Ape."

Viridis is a young planet which bears (at first glance) old life-forms. Come away and let the green planet roll around its sun; come back in a while—not long, as astronomical time goes.

The jungle is much the same, the sea, the rolling savannahs. But the life ...

Viridis was full of primates. There were blunt-toothed herbivores and long-limbed tree-dwellers, gliders and burrowers. The fish-eaters were adapting the way all Viridis life must adapt, becoming more fit by becoming simpler, or go to the wall. Already the sea-apes had rudimentary gills and had lost their hair. Already tiny forms competed with the insects on their own terms.

On the banks of the wandering rivers, monotremes with

opposed toes dredged and paddled, and sloths and lemurs crept at night. At first they had stayed together, but they were soon too numerous for that; and a half dozen generations cost them the power of speech, which was, by then, hardly a necessity. Living was good for primates on Viridis, and became better each generation.

Eating and breeding, hunting and escaping filled the days and the cacophonous nights. It was hard in the beginning to see a friend cut down, to watch a slender silver shape go spinning down a river and know that with it went some of your brother, some of your mate, some of yourself. But as the hundreds became thousands and the thousands millions, witnessing death became about as significant as watching your friend get his hair cut. The basic ids each spread through the changing, mutating population like a stain, crossed and recrossed by the strains of the others, co-existing, eating each other and being eaten and all the while passing down through the generations.

There was a cloud over the savannah, high over the ruins of the compound. It was a thing of many colors and of no particular shape, and it was bigger than one might imagine, not knowing how far away it was.

From it dropped a golden spot that became a thread, and down came a golden mass. It spread and swung, exploded into a myriad of individuals. Some descended on the compound, erasing and changing, lifting, breaking—always careful to kill nothing. Others blanketed the planet, streaking silently through the green aisles, flashing unimpeded through the tangled thickets. They combed the river-banks and the half-light of hill waves, and everywhere they went they found and touched the mushroom and stripped it of its spores, the compaction and multiplication of what had once been the representatives of a very high reptile culture.

Primates climbed and leaped, crawled and crept to the jungle margins to watch. Eater lay by eaten; the hunted stood on the hunter's shoulder, and a platypoid laid an egg in the open which nobody touched.

Simian forms hung from the trees in loops and ropes, in swarms and beards, and more came all the time, brought by some ineffable magnetism to watch at the hill. It was a fast and a waiting, with no movement but jostling for position, a crowding

forward from behind and a pressing back from the slightest chance of interfering with the golden visitors.

Down from the polychrome cloud drifted a mass of the golden beings, carrying with them a huge sleek ship. They held it above the ground, sliced it, lifted it apart, set down this piece and that until a shape began to grow. Into it went bales and bundles, stocks and stores, and then the open tops were covered. It was a much bigger installation than the one before.

Quickly, it was done, and the golden cloud hung waiting.

The jungle was trembling with quiet.

In one curved panel of the new structure, something spun, fell outward, and out of the opening came a procession of stately creatures, long-headed, bright-eyed, three-toed, richly plumed and feathered. They tested their splendid wings, then stopped suddenly, crouched and looking upward.

They were given their obeisance by the golden ones, and after there appeared in the sky the exquisite symbol of a beauty that rides up and up, turns and spirals down again only to rise again; the symbol of that which has no beginning and no end, and the sign of those whose worship and whose work it is to bring to all the Universe that which has shown itself worthy in parts of it.

Then they were gone, and the jungle exploded into killing and flight, eating and screaming, so that the feathered ones dove back into their shelter and closed the door ...

And again to the green planet (when the time was right) came the cloud-ship, and found a world full of birds, and the birds watched in awe while they harvested their magic dust, and built a new shelter. In this they left four of their own for later harvesting, and this was to make of Viridis a most beautiful place.

From Viridis, the ship vaulted through the galaxies, searching for worlds worthy of what is human in humanity, whatever their manner of being alive. These they seeded, and of these, perhaps one would produce something new, something which could be reduced to the dust of Viridis, and from dust return.

Extrapolation

“READ IT FOR YOURSELF,” said the Major.

She took the sheaf of flimsies from him and for a moment gave him that strange dry gaze. *The woman's in shock*, he thought, and did what he could to put down the other two memories he had of eyes like that: an injured starling which had died in his hand; his four-year-old niece, the time he struck her, and the long unbearable moment between the impact and her tears.

Mrs. Reger read carefully and slowly. Her face slept. Her eyes reflected and would not transmit. Her long hands were more vulnerable. The Major heard the whisper of the thin paper; then she turned far enough away from him to steady the backs of her fingers against the mantel. When at last she was finished, she put the report down on the black coffee table gently, gently, as if it might shatter. They stood together looking down on it and its blue blare of stamp-pad ink: TOP SECRET.

She said, at last, “That is the foulest thing a human being has ever done.” Then her mouth slept again.

“I’m glad you agree,” he said. “I was afraid that—” and then she was looking at him again and he could not go on.

“I don’t think I understood you,” he said tonelessly. “You meant the report. I thought you meant Wolf Reger.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” she said.

She glanced down at the report. “That isn’t Wolf. Wolf might be a lot of things ... things that are ... hard to understand. But he isn’t a traitor.” The Major saw her face lifting and turned his head to avoid those hurt eyes. “I think,” she said quietly, “that you’d better go, Major, and take those lies with you.”

He made no move toward the report. “Mrs. Reger,” he suddenly shouted, “do you think I’m enjoying this? Do you think I volunteered for this job?”

“I hadn’t thought about you at all.”

“Try it,” he said bitterly. Then, “Sorry. I’m sorry. This whole thing ...” He pulled himself together. “I wish I could believe you. But you’ve got to realize that a man died to make that report and

get it back to us. We have no choice but to take it for the truth and act accordingly. What else can we do?"

"Do what you like. But don't ask me to believe things about my husband that just aren't so."

Watching her, he felt that if she lost that magnificent control it would be more than he could bear. God, he thought, *where did a rat like Reger ever find such a woman?* As gently as he could, he said, "Very well, Mrs. Reger. You needn't believe it ... May I tell you exactly what my assignment is?"

She did not answer.

He said, "I was detailed to get from you everything which might have any bearing on—on this report." He pointed. "Whether I believe it or not is immaterial. Perhaps if you can tell me enough about the man, I won't believe it. Perhaps," he said, knowing his voice lacked conviction, "we can clear him. Wouldn't you help clear him?"

"He doesn't need clearing," she said impatiently. Then, when he made a tiny, exasperated sound, she said, "I'll help you. What do you want to know?"

All the relief, all the gratitude, and all the continuing distaste for this kind of work were in his voice. "Everything. Why he might do a thing like that." And quickly, "Or why he wouldn't."

She told him about Wolf Reger, the most hated man on Earth.

Beware the fury of a patient man.

Wolf Reger had so many talents that they were past enumerating. With them he had two characteristics which were extreme. One was defenselessness. The other was an explosive anger which struck without warning, even to Reger himself.

His defenselessness sprang from his excess of ability. When blocked, it was all too easy for him to excel in some other field. It was hard to make him care much for anything. Rob him, turn him, use him—it didn't matter. In a day, a week, he could find something better. For this he was robbed, and turned, and used.

His anger was his only terror. When he was eight he was chasing another boy—it was fun; they ran and laughed and dodged through the boy's large old house. And at the very peak of hilarity, the other boy ran outside and slammed the French doors in Wolf's face and stood grinning through the glass. Wolf instantly hit the face with his fist. The double-thick glass

shattered. Wolf severed two tendons and an artery in his wrist, and the other boy fell gasping, blood from his carotid spurting between his futile fingers. The boy was saved, but the effect on Wolf was worse than if he had died. His anger had lasted perhaps three microseconds, and when it was gone, it was gone completely. So brief a thing could hardly be termed a madness—not even a blindness. But it left the boy with the deep conviction that one day this lightning would strike and be gone, and he would find himself looking at a corpse.

He never ran and shouted again. He lived every moment of the next four years under the pressure of his own will, holding down what he felt was an internal devil, analyzing every situation he met for the most remote possibility of its coming to life again. With that possibility visualized, he would avoid the situation. He therefore avoided sandlot baseball and school dances; competitions and group activities; friendship. He did very well with his school work. He did very badly with his fellows.

When he was twelve he met a situation he could not avoid. He was in his second year of high school then, and every day for three weeks a bulky sophomore twice his size would catch him on his way from English to Geometry II, wrap a thick arm around his neck, and grind a set of knuckles into his scalp. Wolf took it and took it, and one day he tore himself free and struck. He was small and thin, and the chances are that the surprise of the attack was more effective than its power. Their legs were entangled and the bigger boy was off balance. He hit the tile floor with his head and lay quite still with his lips white, and blood trickling from his ear. For six weeks they did not know if he would live or not. Wolf was expelled from school the day it happened, and never went to another. From that point on he never dared be angry.

It was easy to hate Wolf Reger. He surpassed anyone he worked with and was disliked for it. He retreated from anyone who wanted what he had, and was despised for it. He communicated but would not converse. He immediately and forcefully rejected any kind of companionship; apparently because he did not need it, but actually because he did not dare let anyone come close to him. And his basic expertness was extrapolation—the ability to project every conceivable factor in a situation to every possible conclusion. He chose his work this way. He chose his restaurants this way, his clothes—everything he did and was. He lived to

avoid others for their own protection.

He had two great successes—one a chemical process and one an electronic device. They taught him enough about fame to frighten him away from it. Fame meant people, meetings, associates. After that he let others take the credit for the work he did.

At thirty he was married.

“Why?”

The question hung offensively in the air between them for an appreciable time before the Major realized that he had spoken it aloud and incredulously.

She said, carefully, “Major, what have you in your notebook so far?”

He looked down at the neat rows of symbols. “A few facts. A few conjectures.”

With an accuracy that shook him in his chair, she said coldly, “You have him down as a warped little genius with every reason to hate humanity. If I weren’t sure of that, I wouldn’t go on with this. Major,” she said suddenly in a different voice, “suppose I told you that I was walking down the street and a man I had never seen before suddenly roared at me, leapt on my back, knocked me down, beat me and rolled me in the gutter. Suppose you had fifty eyewitnesses who would swear it happened. What would you think of the man?”

He looked at her sleek hair, her strong, obedient features. Despite himself he felt a quixotic anger toward her attacker, even in hypothesis. “Isn’t it obvious? The man would have to be a drunk, a psychopath. At the very least he would have to be deluded, think you were someone else. Even if he did, only a real skunk would do a thing like that to a woman.” He suddenly realized how easily she had pulled him away from his subject, and was annoyed. “What has this to do—”

“You’ll see.” She captured his gaze, and he had the sensation that for the very first time she was examining him, looking at his eyes, his mouth; looking at him as a man instead of an unavoidable talking-machine in uniform. “I hope you’ll see,” she said thoughtfully. Then, “You wanted to know why he married me.”

The Army wants to know that, he corrected silently. *I’d like to*

know why you married him.

She committed suicide.

Relentlessly she told the Major why, and he put his pencil down until she had finished with that part of the story. This was a report on Reger, not on his wife. Her reasons were good, at the time, and they constituted a tale of disillusion and defeat which has been, and will be, told again and again.

She stumbled out into the desert and walked until she dropped; until she was sure there could be no rescue; until she had barely strength to lift the phial and drink. She regained consciousness eight months later, in civilian married quarters at Space Base Two. She had been dead twice.

It was a long time before she found out what had happened. Reger, who would not permit himself to move about among people, took his exercise at night, and found her; she had walked almost to the Base without knowing it, and Reger all but tripped over her body. It was not a small body, and he was not a large man, but somehow he got her back to his quarters, a one-room-and-bath affair as near to the edge of the housing area as it could be and still be in the Base. She was still alive—barely.

How he saved her, no one but Reger could know. He knew she was drugged or poisoned, and exhausted. He found the right medication to keep her from slipping further away, but for weeks he could not bring her back. He did the job for which he was hired, and he worked over her as well, and no one knew she was there. Twice her heart stopped and he started it again, once with adrenalin and once with electric shock.

Her autonomic nervous system was damaged. When she began to convalesce, he started drug therapy. He kept her paralyzed and at the edge of unconsciousness, so that the slow business of repair could proceed without hindrance. He fed her intravenously.

And still he kept his job, and no one knew.

And then one day there was a knock on his door. One room and bath; to open the door was to open the whole room to an outsider. He ignored the knock and it came again, and then again, timidly but insistently. He extrapolated, as always, and disliked his conclusion. A woman in his bachelor quarters created a situation which could only mean people and people, and talk and talk—and the repeated, attenuated annoyance which, of all

things, he feared most.

He picked her up and carried her into the bathroom and shut the door. Then he answered the knock. It was nothing important—a chirping little bird of a woman who was taking up a collection for a Thanksgiving party for the orphans in town. He wrote her a check and got rid of her, snarling suddenly that she must never bother him again—and pass the word. That, and the size of the check, took care of her and anyone like her.

He nearly collapsed from reaction after she had gone. He knew he could not possibly outguess the exigencies which might arise to bring other people on other errands. A power failure, a fire, even curious boys or a peeping Tom; the law of averages dictated that in spite of his reputation for being a recluse, in spite of the isolation of his quarters, somebody had to discover his secret. She had been with him for four months now. How could he explain her? Doctors would know she had been under treatment for some time; the Air Force people at the Base, and their cackling wives, would make God only knew what sort of racket about it.

So he married her.

It took another six weeks to build her up sufficiently to be moved. He drove her to a town a hundred and fifty miles away and married her in a hotel room. She was under a skilfully applied hypnotic, and carefully instructed. She knew nothing about it at the time and remembered nothing afterward. Reger then applied for married quarters, moved her back to the Base and continued her therapy. Let them pry. He had married, and his bride was not only ill but as anti-social as he.

“There’s your androphobe,” said Mrs. Reger. “He could have let me die. He could have turned me over to the doctors.”

“You’re a very attractive woman,” he pointed out. “You were that, plus a challenge ... two kinds of challenge. Could he keep you alive? Could he do it while doing his job? A man who won’t compete with people generally finds something else to pit himself against.”

“You’re quite impartial while you wait for all the facts,” she said bitterly.

“No, I’m not,” he said, and quite astonished himself by adding, “It’s just that I can’t lie to you.” There was a slight emphasis on the last word which he wished he could go back and erase.

She let it pass and went on with her story.

She must have had consciousness of a sort long before he was aware of it. She was born again, slowly, aware of comfort and safety, an alteration of light and dark, a dim appreciation of the way in which her needs were met, a half-conscious anticipation of his return when she found herself alone.

He surrounded her with music—the automatic phonograph when he was away, the piano when he was home and not busy. Music was his greatest escape, and he escaped deeply into it. She had been musical all her life, and recognized an astonishing sensitivity in the silent man. Security and the wordless reaches of music broadened her consciousness from a thin line to a wide swath, forward and back, past and future. The more she fumbled her way back, the more she appreciated her present, and the more it mystified her. Because of this she lay quiet for many days when she could have spoken to him, trying to understand. When at last she was ready, she frightened him badly. She had never dreamed that anyone could be quite so shy, so self-abasing. She had not known that a human being could dislike himself so much. Yet he had an inner strength and unlimited resourcefulness. He was completely efficient in everything he did except in his effort to talk with her.

He told her, with terror in his eyes, of their marriage, and he begged her pardon for it. It was as if a harsh word from her would destroy him. And she smiled and thanked him. He went silently away and sat down at the piano, though he did not play it again while she was there.

She convalesced very quickly after that. She tried her very best to understand him. She succeeded in making him talk about himself, and was careful not to help him, ever, nor to work with him at anything. He never touched her. She divined that he never should, until he was quite ready, and so she never forced the issue. She fell completely in love with him.

At the time, the *Starscout* was in the ways, and they were running final tests on it. Reger was forced to spend more and more time out at the gantry area. Sometimes he would work fifty or sixty consecutive hours, and though she hated to see him stumble home, drawn and tired, she looked forward to these times. For in his deepest sleep, she could tiptoe into his room and

sit near and watch his face, study it with the stiffness of control gone, find in it the terrified eight-year-old with blood spouting from his wrist, watching a playmate with a cut throat. She could isolate the poet, the painter, in him, speaking and creating and expressing only in music, for words and shapes could not be trusted. She loved him. She could wait. Those who love love, and those who love themselves, cannot wait. Those who love another can and do. So she watched him silently and tiptoed out when he stirred.

His extrapolations never ceased, and he was aware before she was that, not being a Wolf Reger, her needs were different from his. He suggested that she walk in the sun when he was away. He told her where the commissary was, and left money for shopping. She did as he expected her to do.

Then he didn't come back from the gantry area any more, and when the fifty or sixty hours got to be seventy and eighty, she made up her mind to find him. She knew quite a few people at the Base by that time. She walked in, stopping at the post office on the way. The divorce papers were waiting for her there.

The Major dropped his pencil.

"You didn't know about that."

"Not yet. We'd have found out anyway." He stooped, groping for the pencil, and cracked his head noisily on the coffee table. He demanded, "Why? Why did he divorce you?"

"He didn't. He filed suit. It has to be put on the court calendar and then heard, and then adjudicated, and then there's a ninety-day wait ... you know. I went to a dance."

"A—oh." He understood that this was in answer to his question. "He divorced you because you went to a dance?"

"No!... well, yes." She closed her eyes. "I used to go to the Base movie once in a while when Wolf was working. I went down there and there was a dance going on instead. I sat with one of the women from the commissary and watched, and after a while her husband asked me to dance. I did. I knew Wolf would have let me if he'd been there—not that he ever would."

"And I happened to glance through the door as we danced past, and Wolf was standing just outside. His face ..."

She rose and went to the mantel. She put out her hand very slowly, watching it move, and trailed the tips of her fingers along

the polished wood. "All twisted. All ...

"As soon as the music stopped," she whispered, "I ran out to him. He was still there."

The Major thought, *Don't break, for God's sake don't. Not while I'm here.*

"Extrapolation," she said. "Everything he saw, he computed and projected. I was dancing. I suppose I was smiling. Wolf never learned to dance, Major. Can you imagine how important that can be to a man who can do anything?"

"When I got outside he was just the same as always, quiet and controlled. What he was going through inside, I hate to think. We walked home and the only thing that was said was when I told him I was sorry. He looked at me with such astonishment that I didn't dare say anything else. Two days later he left."

"On the *Starscout*. Didn't you know he was a crewmember?"

"No. I found out later. Wolf had so many skills that he was nine-tenths of a crew all by himself. They'd wanted him for the longest time, but he'd always refused. I guess because he couldn't bear sharing space with someone."

"He did, with you."

"Did he?"

The Major did not answer. She said, "That was going to end. He was sure of that. It could end any time. But space flight's something else again."

"Why did he divorce you?"

She seemed to shake herself awake. "Have I been talking out loud?" she asked.

"What? Yes!"

"Then I've told you."

"Perhaps you have," he conceded. He poised his pencil.

"What are you going to write?" When he would not answer, she said, "Not telling the truth any more, Major?"

"Not now," he said firmly.

For the second time she gave him that searching inspection, really seeing him. "I wonder what you're thinking," she murmured.

He wrote, closed the book and rose. "Thank you very much for cooperating like this," he said stiffly.

She nodded. He picked up his hat and went to the door. He opened it, hesitated, closed it again. "Mrs. Reger—"

She waited, unbelievably still—her body, her mouth.

“In your own words—why did he file suit?”

She almost smiled. “You think my words are better than what you wrote?” Then, soberly, “He saw me dancing and it hurt him. He was shocked to the core. He hadn’t known it would hurt. He hadn’t realized until then that he loved me. He couldn’t face that—he was afraid we might be close. And one day he’d lose his temper, and I’d be dead. So he went out into space.”

“Because he loved you.”

“Because he loved me enough,” she said quietly.

He looked away from her because he must, and saw the report still lying on the coffee table. “I’d better take this along.”

“Oh yes, do.” She picked it up, handed it to him. “It’s the same thing as that story I told you—about the man knocking me down.”

“Man—oh. Yes, that one. What was that about?”

“It really happened,” she said. “He knocked me down and beat me, right in broad daylight, in front of witnesses, and everything I said about it is true.”

“Bastard,” growled the Major, and then blushed like a girl. “I’m sorry.”

She did smile, this time. “There was a loading-dock there, in front of a warehouse. A piece of machinery in a crate got loose and slid down a chute toward the street. It hit a drum of gasoline and struck a spark. The first thing I knew, I was all over flames. That man knocked me down and beat them out with his bare hands. He saved my life.”

Slowly, his jaw dropped. She said, “It makes a difference, when you know all the facts, doesn’t it? Even when the first facts you got are all true?” She rapped the TOP SECRET stamp with her fingernails. “I said this was all a lie. Well, maybe it’s all true. But if it is, it’s like the first part of that little story. You need the rest of it. I don’t. You don’t know Wolf Reger. I do. Goodbye, Major.”

He sat in his office at Headquarters and slowly pounded the fresh copy of his transcribed notes. *I have to send them the way they are*, he thought, and *but I can’t. I can’t*.

He swore violently and got up. He went to the water-cooler, punched out a paper cup, filled it, and hurled it into the wastebasket. *All I have is facts. She has faith.*

The world was full of women, and a perfectly normal percentage of them were capable of knocking him for a loop. He wasn't immune. But surely he was old enough and wise enough by now not to let it interfere with facts. Especially in this case. If the world knew what was in that TOP SECRET report, the world would know how to feel about Wolf Reger. And then Reger's wife would be one against three and a quarter billion. How could a man in his right mind worry about a choice, with odds like that?

He cursed again and snatched up his briefcase, unlocked it, and took out the secret report. He slammed it down on top of his transcript. *One more look. One more look at the facts.*

He read:

This is the fourth time I've erased this tape and now I got no time for officialese if I'm going to get it all on here. A tape designed for hull-inspection reports in space wasn't designed for a description of a planetary invasion. But that's what it's got to be. So, for the record, this is Jerry Wain, Starscout navigator, captive on one of the cruisers that's going to invade Earth. First contact with extra-terrestrials. Supposed to be a great moment in human history. Likely to be one of the last moments, too.

The Starscout's gone and Minelli, Joe Cook, and the Captain are dead. That leaves me and that bastard Reger. The aliens had us bracketed before we knew it, out past Jupiter. They cut up the 'scout with some sort of field or something that powdered the hull in lines as broad as your hand. No heat, no impact. Just fine powder, and she fell apart. Joe never got to a suit. The Captain went forward, to stay with the ship I guess, and couldn't have lived long after they sliced the dome off the control room. The three of us got clear and they took us in. They cut Minelli up to see what his guts looked like. I haven't seen Reger, but he's alive, all right. Reger, he can take care of himself.

I've only seen two of the aliens, or maybe I saw one of 'em twice. If you can imagine a horseshoe crab made out of blue airfoam, a wide skirt all the way around it, the whole works about four and a half meters across, that's close. I'm not a biologist, so I guess I can't be much help on the details. That skirt sort of undulates front to back when it moves. I'd say it swims through the air—hop and glide, hop and glide. It can crawl too. First I thought it slid along like a snail, but once I saw a whole mess of little legs, some with pincers on them. I don't know how many. Too many, anyhow. No eyes that I could spot, although it must have 'em; it's light in here, grayish, like on a

snowfield on an overcast day. It comes from the bulkhead. Floor, too—everywhere.

Gravity, on a guess, is about one-sixth Earth. The atmosphere's hot. Seems to be light gases. I cracked my oxy relief valve and struck a spark on it with the back of my glove, and that was pretty spectacular. Hydrogen for sure. Something else that gives an orange cast to the flame. You figure it. I wish I knew as much as Reger. Though I wouldn't use it like he's doing.

The compartment I'm in is altogether bare. There's a transparent oval port on one bulkhead. No frame; looks just as if the hull material was made transparent just there. Looking in at an angle I can see she's double-hulled, and there's some sort of optical trickery that makes it possible to see almost directly forward and aft, although I'd say the outside of the port was flush with the skin. I can't tell you a thing about the drive. I barely saw them before they had us boxed, and then all hell broke loose. I did get a look while we were adrift, though, and some of the ships were maneuvering. It isn't jets; that's for sure. They can take off like a bullet and stop as if they'd hit a wall. They have some way of canceling inertia. Or most of it. Riding inside is pretty rough, but coming to a dead stop in two seconds from a thousand k.p.h. or better should butter you all over the walls instead of just slamming you into the bulkhead like it does. They can't operate in an atmosphere without wings, and they don't have wings. Yet.

I counted twenty-six ships—sixteen big ones, cruisers I guess you'd call them; two-fifty to three hundred meters long, perfect cylinders. And ten small ones, oblate spheres, thirty meters or so in diameter. Destroyers, maybe. Fast as hell, even compared to the big ones. I think my count's accurate, and you needn't expect any more than that. But that's plenty, with what they can do.

When they brought us in first they slung me in here and nothing happened that I knew about, for sixteen hours. Then that first bug came in through a sort of pucker in the wall that got transparent and spread out and let him through and then bing! the wall was solid again. I guess I was pretty paralyzed for a while, looking it over and then wondering which way it was going to jump. Then I saw what it was carrying on one side, the skirt-thing curled up like a sort of shelf. It was Minelli's leg lying there. That tattoo, you know, the girl holding the space-ship. I could see the top end of the femur, where it's supposed to fit into the hip-joint. That leg wasn't cut off. The joint had been torn apart.

I guess I went a little crazy. I had my antenna-wrench off the belt-rack and was throwing it almost before I knew what I was doing. I missed. Didn't allow for the gravity, I guess. It went high. The bug sort of humped itself and next thing I knew I couldn't move. I could, inside the space-suit, but the suit was like a single iron casting.

The bug slid over to me and hitched up a little—that's when I saw all those little legs—and got everything off my belt—torch, stillson, antenna-reel, everything that would move. It didn't touch my tanks—I guess it knew already about the tanks. From Reger, busy-boy Reger. It took the whole bundle over to the outer bulkhead and all of a sudden there was a square hole there. It dropped my stuff in and the hole went away, and out through the port I could see my stuff flash away from the ship, going like hell. So that's how I found out about the disposal chute.

The bug slid away to the other wall and I was going to give it a shot from my heel-jets, but somehow I had sense enough not to. I didn't know what damage they'd do, and I might be able to use 'em later. If anyone's hearing this, I did.

About three weeks later I had another visit from one of 'em, but I charged it as soon as it was inside. It slid away through the air and then froze me again. I guess after that they gave me up as a bad job.

They don't feed me, and my converters are pretty low. I've rationed my air and water all I could, but it's past conversion now, without a complete recharge, and I'm not likely to get that. I was hungry, like I never knew hunger could be, after my emergency rations were gone, but I don't feel that any more. Just weak.

This whole time, the ships have been busy. We're in the Belt, I'd guess, without instruments, around 270-20-95. Check those coordinates and hunt a spiral from that center—I'm pretty sure we're near that position. Put infra-red on it; even if they've gone by then, there should be residual heat in these rocks out here. They've leeches onto a big one and it's practically gone now. They make long fast passes back and forth like a metal-planer. I can't see a ray or beam or anything, but the surface flows molten as the ships pass. Mining. I guess they filter the slag some way and distill the metals out. I wouldn't know. I'm a navigator. All I can think of is those ships making passes like that over the Golden Gate and Budapest and LaCrosse, Wisconsin.

I found out how to work the disposal chute. Just lean against it. It's an air-lock with some sort of heavy coils around it, inside, I guess to

project refuse away from the ship so it won't orbit. They must've known I was fooling with it but nobody stopped me. They knew I couldn't get anywhere. Even if they knew about my heel-jets, they probably knew I couldn't get far enough with them to make no never mind.

Well, six hours ago a sort of dark spot began to show on the inboard bulkhead. It swelled up until it was a knob about the size of your two fists, shiny black, with some kind of distortion field around it so it was muzzy around the edges. For a while I couldn't figure it at all. I touched it and then took hold of it, and I realized it was vibrating around five hundred cycles, filling my suit with the note. I got my helmet onto it right away.

The note went on and then changed pitch some and finally spread out into a noise like a forty-cycle carrier, and something started modulating it, and next thing it was saying my name, flat and raspy, no inflection. An artificial voice, for sure. "Wain," it said, clearing itself up as it went along "Wain, Wain."

So I kept my head tight against it and yelled, "Wain here."

It was quiet for a while, just the carrier, and then the voice came in again. I won't bother you with exactly what it sounded like. The language was rugged but clear, like "Wain we no have planet you have planet we take you help."

There was a lot of yelling back and forth until I got the picture. And what I want to tell you most is this: once in a while when I listened real carefully I heard another voice, murmuring away. Reger—that I'll swear. It was as if this voder, or voice machine, was being run by one of the bugs and Reger was telling it what to say but they wouldn't trust him to talk directly to me.

Anyway, the bugs had a planet and something had happened to it, I don't know what; but Earth was as close as anything they'd seen to what they want. They figure to land and establish a base and set up machinery to take over. They had spores that would grow in our seawater and get rid of most of the oxygen, I guess by combining it with all the elements in the ocean that could take it. Meanwhile, they'd convert rocks to put whatever else they needed into the atmosphere.

So damn cold-blooded ... it wasn't us they were after. You clear a patch of wood, you're not trying especially to dispossess the squirrels and the termites. That just happens while you work.

For a while I hoped we could maybe do something, but item by item they knocked that out of my head. Reger'd told 'em everything. You

look up that guy's record. He knows atomics and ship design and chemistry and about every damn thing, and it's all theirs. You know that field, or whatever, that they paralyzed my suit with; it's an application of the inertia-control their ships have. You know, if you throw an A-bomb at that field, the bomb won't hit and it won't fire? You couldn't even throw rocks at it—they'd have no inertia at contact. They know we have no space fleet, only a half-dozen exploring scouts, and the moon-shuttle.

We're done, that's all.

So I asked what's the proposition, and they said they could use me. They didn't really need me, but they could use me. They said I could have anything I wanted on Earth, and all the slaves I could put to work. Slaves. I heard Reger give 'em the word. I'd have thirty, forty years of that before they all died off. I'd work under Reger. He was directing the landing for them. Designing wings for them to come in on, too—that's what the mining was for, the wings. They'll put the base down in a desert somewhere, and first thing anyone knows the oxygen will start to go. And even if you do see 'em come in, you won't be able to touch 'em.

Maybe I shouldn't even try to warn you. Maybe it'll be better if you never know what hit you ...

Reger, he ... he's ... ah, stick to facts, Wain. Something makes him hate Earth enough to ... I don't see even a coward doing a thing like this just to save his skin. He has to have some other reason.

The bump on the wall said, "Reger says work with him, you can trust."

Yeah, I can trust. I told them what to do with their proposition and shove Reger along after it.

Now this is what I am going to do. Try, anyhow. My suit's the only one with a tape recorder, and it's internal. Could be that Reger doesn't even know about it. What I'm going to do is wait until this ship starts paring away at the asteroid. It gets up quite a hell of a speed at each pass, more than you'd think, because of the inertialess field. At the sunward end of one pass, I'll go out the chute. I'll have the ship's speed plus the throw-out coils in the chute.

I'll gyro around to head for the sun. I've wired the heel-jet starter to my oxy supply. When the oxy stops flowing the jets'll cut in. I hope by then I'll be far enough away so they won't detect me, or won't bother with me. That's something I won't live to know about.

And I've wired the fuel gauge to my distress squealer. When the

fuel's all gone the squealer'll cut in. There ought to be scouts out searching for my ship; maybe one will scoop me in.

We're positioning over the rock now.

Maybe I won't get through the chute. Maybe they'll powder me before I get clear. Maybe they'll pick up my jets when they cut in. Maybe they'll hear the squealer when the jets are gone. So many maybes.

Don't anybody call me a hero for doing this. I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it to Reger. That bastard Reger ...

Jerry Wain here, over and out.

The Major lifted his head from the report. Maybe one day he would be able to read it without his eyes stinging like this.

He lifted the flimsies away to uncover his own transcript. Coldly it listed the pertinent facts of his interview with the traitor's wife. He read them through again slowly, right through the last paragraph, which said:

SUMMATION: It is indicated that the subject is a brilliant but twisted individual, and that early influences as noted, plus his mode of life, have induced a morbid fear of himself and a deep distrust of every human being, including his wife. His extrapolative ability plus his vivid imagination seem to have created a certainty in him that he had been betrayed, or that he certainly would be. His actions as reported by Wain are apparently motivated by vengeance—a vengeance against all humanity including even himself.

The talker hissed, and a voice said, "Major, the Colonel would like your report on the Reger interview."

"Roger." He caught it up, held it, then slid it into his autowriter and rapidly tapped out:

The undersigned wishes to stress the partial nature of the above report, based as it is on the statement of a man under serious strain. Further evidence might conceivably alter the conclusions as stated.

He signed it and added his rank and section, rolled it, canned it and slapped it into the pneumatic tube.

"Now what the hell did I do that for?" he asked himself. He knew what the answer was. He rose and went to the mirror in the corner by the water-cooler, and peered into it. He shook his head in disgust.

When the ships were sighted, Wain's recording came out of the files and went straight to the wire services. One of the columnists said later that the ensuing roar from Earth all but moved the Moon out of its orbit. Suddenly, there was no such thing as a secret weapon anywhere. Suddenly, there was—for the time being—nothing that could be called a nation. There was only the thunder of panic, fear, and fury, and in each of these, the name of Reger, rolling in the hollows of the Himalayas, blasting through the wide streets of Buenos Aires and the alleys of London. They feared the alien, but they hated Reger.

Without Wain's recording, the alien might have slipped close, or even landed, before the world was alerted. Without it, a general alarm certainly would have awaited some sort of identification. But Earth was as ready as three billion fierce, fearing, furious humans could make it in the brief time they had.

The ships came single file, faster than any man-made object had ever traveled. They were exactly what Wain had described—sixteen large cylinders, ten small spheres. They were in six flights, one behind the other, each but one composed of both types, and the other an ominous line of five of the heavies.

They bore straight in for Earth, their single file presenting the smallest possible profile to Earth radar. (Reger knew radar.) When every known law of spatial ballistics dictated that with that course, at that velocity, they must plunge straight into the planet, they decelerated and swung to take up an orbit—rather, a powered course—around the planet, just out of rocket interceptor range (which Reger knew).

And now their wings could be seen. Telefax and television, newspapers and government agencies researched their contours in minutes. They were familiar enough—a gull-wing design which one aeronautical engineer described as having “every characteristic that could be built into a wing.” Each wing, from root to tip, had its own reverse dihedral. Each was sharply tapered, and sharply swept back. Even the little spherical destroyers had them, along with a boom to support the butterfly tail. There was one Earth design almost exactly like it—an extremely stable large-plane airfoil for sub-sonic use. The designer: Wolf Reger.

The space scouts roared up to challenge them, heavy with armament and anger. They sent a cloud of missiles ahead of

them. There was H.E. and atomics, solid-shot and a whole spectrum of random-frequency radio, just in case.

The radio waves affected the aliens precisely as much—as little—as the fusion warheads. Telescopic lenses watched the missiles race to their targets and simply stop there, to slide around the shining hulls and hang until, one by one, they were brought aboard.

And then the little scouts tried to ram, and were deflected like angling guppies from the sides of an aquarium, to go screaming off into space and a laborious turn.

For three days the enemy circled outside the atmosphere, holding their formation, absorbing or ignoring everything Earth could throw at them.

The Major telephoned Reger's wife to ask if she had removed her name from her mailbox and doorbell. She said indignantly that she had not, would not, and need not. The Major sighed and sent a squad down late that night to arrest her. She was furious. Yet she conceded his point fairly the next morning when she saw the newspaper photographs of her apartment. Even the window-frames were gone. The mob had chopped right through the floor in places, had even heaved the bathtub twelve floors down to the street. "You should know as much about people as you think you know about Wolf Reger," he said.

"You should know as much about Wolf as you do about people," she countered. There was, with her composure, a light he had not seen before. He said, suddenly, "You know something."

"I do?"

"You act as if you'd had a special delivery letter from that—from your husband."

"You're quite right."

"What?"

She laughed. It was the first time he had heard her laugh, and something with hands, ever so deep within him, wrung them.

"I shouldn't tease you, Major. If I promise to tell you when it's time, will you promise not to ask me now?"

"My job is to find out every little detail that can possibly bear on the situation," he said stiffly.

"Even if it didn't add one bit to your understanding?"

"You can't judge that."

"I certainly can."

He shook his head. "It's our job to decide. I'm afraid you'll have to tell me whatever it is."

Her gaiety slipped away inside her, and a new kind of brightness shone in her eyes. "Well, I won't."

He began to speak, then stopped. He need make no experiments to discover that this extraordinary woman could not be bribed, coerced, or even surprised. He said gently, "Very well. I won't ask. And you'll tell me as soon as you can?"

"The very second."

He kept her in his office. She seemed not to mind. He let her read all the invasion reports as they came in, and he watched every flicker of expression in her face. "When are you going to admit that enough facts are in to show that there's no hero in this story, no one beating out flames?"

"Never. Have you ever been married, Major?"

Sourly, he thought, *Have you?* "No," he said.

"You've loved someone, though?"

He wondered how she kept her features so controlled under stress. He would like to learn that trick. He said, "Yes."

"Well, then. You only need a few facts about the one you love. Just enough to put point the way."

"Three points on a graph to give you a curve, so you can know its characteristics and extend it. Is that what you mean?"

"That's one of the things I mean."

"They call that extrapolation. Your boy's specialty."

"I like that," she said softly. "I like that very much." She detached her eyes from him, from the room, and smiled at what she saw. "*God!*" he exploded.

"Major!"

"You're going to get clobbered," he said hoarsely. "You're going to get such a kick in the teeth ... and there isn't a thing in the world I can do about it."

"Poor Major," she said, looking at him as if he were a memory.

There was a click, and electronic noise filled the room. The talker barked, "Enemy spiralling in. Stand by for trajectory."

"Now you'll see." They realized that they had spoken in unison, but it was the wrong time to exchange a smile.

"Arizona!" said the speaker, and "Stand by."

“Stand by hell,” growled the Major. “We’ll get the fine points by radio. Come on.”

“You’ll take me?”

“Wouldn’t let you out of my sight.”

They ran to the elevators, shot to the roof. A helicopter whisked them to the field, and a jet took them in and tore up and out to the lowering sun.

An unbroken cordon can be thrown about a hundred square miles in less than an hour and a half. This is true, because it was done immediately after the alien fleet touched Earth. Once the landing site was determined, the roads writhed with traffic, the desert crawled with men and machines, the air shook with aircraft, blossomed with parachutes. The ring had not quite closed when the formation came down almost exactly in the predicted center. No longer a single file, the formation was nearly spherical. It arrived on Earth with two thunders—one, the terrible crack as the cloven air smashed back to heal itself, and rebounded and smashed again; the other, a shaking of the Earth itself.

And the cordon stopped, flattened, lay still as a stain while the furious globe built itself in the desert, flung its coat of many colors about itself, mounted the sky and donned its roiling plumes.

And there were no devils there in the desert, but hell itself.

They saw it from the jet, because they were keeping close radio contact with the landing, and straining their eyes into the sunset for a glimpse of the fleet. Their pilot said he saw them, coming in at an impossible speed. The Major missed them as they blinked by, but he did see their wings, like a flurry of paper over a windy corner, drifting brokenly down. And then the fireball fought the sun and, for a while, defeated it, until it became a leaning ghost in a broad, torn hat.

It seemed a long, long time after that when the Major, his palms tight to his eyes, whispered, “You knew that would happen.”

“No I didn’t,” she whispered back, cathedral-awed. “I knew something would happen.”

“Reger did this?”

"Of course." She stirred, glanced at the tower of smoke, and shuddered. "Can you see yet?"

He tried. "Some ..."

"Here," she said. "I promised you. My special-delivery letter."

He took it. "I've seen this. The picture of the fleet."

Exactly as she had once before, she murmured, "Poor Major." She took the print from him, turned it over, deftly slipped his gold pencil from under the pocket-flap of his tunic. "First there was a cruiser, and a cruiser, and a cruiser," she said, and drew a short line for each, one after the other, "and a destroyer and a destroyer." For each of these she made a black disk. "Then the second flight: destroyer, cruiser, destroyer." And so she charted the entire formation. He stared at the marks until she laughed at him. "Captain!"

"Yes ma'am," answered the pilot.

"Would you read this to the Major, please?"

She handed it forward. The Major said, "What do you mean, read it?" but she shushed him.

The pilot glanced at it and handed it back. "It says eighty-eight, thirty, W R."

"No, no—say the codes too."

"Oh—sorry." He glanced at it again. "It says 'Love and kisses. That's all I have for you. W R.' "

"Give me that," snapped the Major. "By God, it's Morse!"

"He hung it up there for three whole days and you couldn't read it."

"Why wouldn't you tell me?"

"How would you have read it before *that* happened?"

He followed her gesture and saw the great hot cloud. "You're right," he breathed. "You're so right. He did that just for you?"

"For you. For everyone. It must have been the only thing he could do to let us know what he was doing. They wouldn't let him radio. They wouldn't even let him talk to Wain."

"Yet they let him deploy their ships."

"I guess because he made the wings for them; they thought he would know best how to use them."

"The wings tore off." To the pilot he said, "Isn't that what happened, Captain?"

"It sure is," said the young man. "And no wonder, the way they flashed in. I've seen that happen before. You can fly under the

speed of sound or over it, but you better not stay just *at* it. Looked to me as if they hung on the barrier all the way in."

"All flown from one set of controls ... probably an automatic pilot, with the course and speed all set up." He looked at the woman. "Reger set it up." Suddenly he shook his head impatiently. "Oh *no!*" They wouldn't have let him get away with it."

"Why not?" she said. "Everything else he told them was true."

"Yes, but they'd have known about the barrier. Captain, just what is the speed of sound up in the stratosphere?"

"Depends, sir. At sea level it's around three-forty meters per second. Up at thirty kilometers or so it's around three hundred, depending on the temperature."

"The density."

"No sir. Most people think that, but it isn't so. The higher the temperature, the higher the speed of sound. Anyway, the 'sound barrier' they talk about is just a convenient term. It happens that shock waves form around a ship anywhere from eighty-five percent to one-hundred-fifteen percent of the speed of sound, because some airflow around it is supersonic and some still subsonic, and you get real weird flow patterns. Some of the buffeting's from that, but most of it's from shock waves, like the ones from the nose hitting the wing tips, or wing shock waves hitting the tail."

"I see. Captain, could you set up a flight-plan which would keep an aircraft at the buffeting stage from the top of the atmosphere down to the bottom?"

"Imagine I could, sir. Though you wouldn't get much buffeting above 35 kilometers or so. No matter what the sonic speed, the air's too thin for shock wave formation."

"Tell you what. You work out a plan like that. Then radio Radar at Prescott and get the dope on Reger's approach."

"Yes, sir." The young man went to work at his chart table.

"It's so *hard* for you," Mrs. Reger said.

"What is?"

"You won't believe it until your little graph's all plotted, with every fact and figure in place. Me, I *know*. I've known all along. It's so easy."

"Hating is easy too," said the Major. "You've probably never done much of that. But *unhating's* a pretty involved process.

There's no way of doing it but to learn the facts. The truth."

They were five minutes away from the mushroom when the Captain finished his calculations. "That's it, sir, that's what happened. It couldn't have been an accident. All the way down, under power, those ships stayed within four percent of sonic speed, and tore themselves to pieces. And here's something else. Radar says that from 32 kilometers on down they showed a different pip. As if they'd shut off that inertia field of theirs."

"They'd have to, or they wouldn't have any kind of supporting airflow over the wings! You can't use an airfoil if the air can't touch it! I guess for some reason their inertia field can't be used near a strong gravitic field."

"And Reger planned that approach, that way?"

"Looks like it. From thirty kilometers to the ground, at that speed ... it was all over in fifteen seconds."

"Reger," muttered the pilot. He went back to the controls and switched off the automatics. "One of the radar pix showed Reger's space-suit, Major," he said. "Looks like he bailed out the same as Wain did—through the disposal chute."

"He's alive!"

"Depends." The young man looked up at the Major. "You think that mob down there is going to wait while we compute velocities for 'em?"

"That's a military setup, Captain. They'll do what they're told."

"About Reger, sir?"

He turned his attention to the controls, and the Major went thoughtfully back to his seat. As they whistled down to the airstrip behind the cordon, he suddenly thumped his knee. "Light gases, high temperature—of *course* those bugs never heard of a shock wave at what we call sonic speed! You see? You see?"

"No," she said. He understood that she did not need to see. She knew.

Maybe, he thought, the female of the species extrapolates without realizing it, and intuitive faith is nothing more than high-velocity computation.

He kept the thought to himself.

The Major walked quietly through the mob, listening. There were soldiers and Air Force men, security officers and civilians. Behind him, the cordon, tightening, reducing the strip between

themselves and the radioactive area. In the cordon, a human getaway: FBI, CIA, G-2, screening those inside. The Major listened.

“He’s got to be inside somewhere.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get the—”

“Hey George, tell you what. We get our hands on him, let’s keep our mouth shut. Army gets him, it’s a trial and all kind of foofaraw. This bunch gets him, they’ll tear him to pieces right *now*.”

“So?”

“Too quick. You and me, one or two other guys from around here—”

“I hear you.”

From somewhere back of the cordon, a tremendous huffing and puffing, and a casual, enormous voice, “Mike hot, Lieutenant,” and then the Psycho Warfare officer: “All right, Reger. We know you didn’t mean it. No one here will hurt you. You’ll get fair treatment all down the line. We understand why you did it. You’ll be safe. We’ll take care of you. Just step right up.” And an interruption and a “Oh, sorry, Sir,” and clearly through the amplifier, “You don’t coddle a son of a bitch like that while I’m around.” Then, harshly, “Reger, step the hell up here and take your medicine. You got it coming to you and you’re going to get it sooner or later.”

The Major heard part of a suggestion about an operation with a blunt nailfile, and walked away from it into “You nail one loop of gut to a tree, see, and walk him around until—”

The space-suit hung grotesquely by its neck against a shattered barn wall. A scraggly man in filthy coveralls stood by a pile of rocks and chunks of four-by-four. “Just three for a dime, gents, and the ladies free. Step right up and clobber the son. Limber up for the real thing. I thank you sir: Hit him hard.” A corporal hefted a round stone and let fly. It hit the space-suit in the groin and the crowd roared. The scraggly man chittered, “One on the house, one on the house!” and handed over another stone.

The Major touched a smooth-faced lieutenant on the arm. “What goes on?”

“Huh? The suit, sir? Oh, it’s all right. G-2’s been and gone. His, all right. He’s got to be around someplace. Well, it’s us or the hot stuff—he can take his choice. The cordon’s getting radiation

armor.”

“There’ll be hell to pay over this caper.”

“Don’t think so,” said the Lieutenant. “General Storms himself pegged a couple.”

“Make ‘im bleed, corp’ral,” shouted the barker to a pfc. He hopped from one foot to another, jingling coins in his pocket. “Whatsa matter, boys, you love ‘im?”

“Imagine him, making a buck,” said the Lieutenant admiringly. “Regular clown.”

“Yeah, a clown,” said the Major, and walked away.

A soft voice said, “One look around here, I wish Reger’d gotten away with it.”

The Major said warmly, “You’re a regular freak around here, mister,” and was completely misunderstood. The man ran away, and the Major could have bitten his tongue in two.

I want to be in a place, the Major thought suddenly, passionately, where the truth makes a difference. And If I were a genius at extrapolation, where would I hide?

“Mr. Reger, you’re a reasonable man,” bellowed the speaker.

“Three for a dime. For a quarter you can throw a second lootenant.”

“He should hold out. He should go back into the bald-spot and fry slowly.”

The cordon moved in a foot. *I just thought of the funniest gag,* thought the Major. *You pour vinegar on this sponge, see, and hold it up on this stick ...*

Slowly he walked back toward the cordon, and then like a warm, growing light, it came to him what he would do if he were a genius at extrapolation, trapped between the advancing wolves and the leaping flames. He’d be a flame, or a wolf. But he couldn’t be this kind of a flame. He couldn’t be an advancing wolf. He’d have to be a wolf which stayed in one spot and let the advance pass him.

He went and stood by the man. This wasn’t the notorious Reger face, hollowed, slender, with the arched nose.

He realized abruptly that the man’s nose was broken and not bruised. And a man would have to wear coveralls for weeks to get them that filthy.

“I’ll take three,” he said, and handed the man a dime.

“Atta boy, Maje.” He handed over two rocks and a billet. The

Major aimed carefully, and said from the side of his mouth, "Okay, love-and-kisses. We've got to get you out of here."

The barker had an instant of utter stillness. Behind him, the speaker roared. "You can trust *me*, Mr. Reger."

The barker roared back, "An' I'll trust *you* Mr. Reger. Step right up and I'll let you have a coupla rocks." To the Major he said, "See, Maje? I'm in a position I can trust practically anyone."

The Major hurled his rock at the space-suit. From the side of his mouth, hardly moving his lips, he said, "High temperature, light gases, no barrier. I know what you did. Let me get you out of here." He threw again and hit the front of the space-suit.

"One on the house, one on the house. I like the way you're going, Maje."

The Major said, softly, "One thing you never extrapolated, genius. Suppose she loved you so much she would take you on faith when three billion people hated your guts?" He hurled the billet, and took out another dime. "I'll call it. I'm going to break a nose." He aimed slowly and said almost into his shoulder, "She never broke faith for a second. She's here now. Will you come?" He threw the rock and hit the face-plate.

"Come on, Reger," shouted the barker. "You got it coming to you sooner or later anyway." He picked up one of his rocks, and whispered—whimpered, perhaps, "I might kill her if I go back ..."

"She might die if you don't."

"There's one you never expected, Reger!" roared the barker, and threw his rock. "Want to yell a while?" he said to a buck-toothed youth in overalls. "I got to go brush my teeth." He walked straight toward the ambulant gate in the cordon, the Major right behind him. Roughly, the Major shoved the little man through. "If it's all the same to you," he said to the FBI man, "I'm curtailing this enterprise."

A CIA man nearby hitched at a shoulder holster and growled, "Fine idea, Major. I was about to mistake him for Reger, the dirty little bloodsucker." They passed outside.

"Never thought I'd find you yelling and gabbing and mixing like that," said the Major.

"You do what you have to do," said the little man. "I once saw a woman lift a six-hundred-pound garage door with one hand and pull her little boy out with the other." He stumbled.

The Major caught him. "Man—you're whipped!"

"You don't know," he whispered. Suddenly, "Don't you love her enough to turn me over to *them*?" You'll never have a better chance."

"Did I say I loved her?"

"One way or another."

They were quiet all the way back to the airstrip. The Major said, in a choked voice, "I love her more than that ... enough to ..." He thumped the side of the plane. "I found him," he called.

The door opened. "I knew you would," she said. They helped Reger in. The Major climbed in beside the pilot. "Fly," he said.

The Major thought, *She knew I would. She has faith in me, too.*

A long time later he thought, *That's something, anyway.*

Granny Won't Knit

FOR ROAN, THERE WAS a flicker of blackness, almost too brief to notice, and he had arrived at his destination. He stepped down from the transplat and took three preoccupied steps before he realized, shockingly, that he had not materialized in the offices of J. & D. Walsh at all, but in a small plat-court hung with heavy and barbarous drapes. There was a fresh and disturbing odor in the air, which was too warm.

He cast about him worriedly, hunting for the dialpost that would send him to his father's office. It was not where it should be, at the corner of the court. Petals! He was late, and lateness meant trouble.

"Well-l-l?" drawled a half singing, half whispering voice.

Roan spun, hitting the side of his foot painfully on the corner of the transplat. It made him hop. He had never felt so excruciatingly foolish in his entire thirty years.

"I'm sorry," he spluttered. "I must have dialed the wrong number." He located the source of the voice—a door across from him was open at its top panel, and, in the small space, was framed a face ...

The face!

If you dream about faces, you dream about them *after* you meet them, not before! The thought blazed at him, made him blink, and he blinked again at the cloud of golden hair and the laughing green eyes.

"... the wrong, you see," he concluded lamely, "number."

"Maybe it was and maybe it wasn't," she said, in tones which could have been scored on a musical staff. Her hand appeared, to press back the side of the golden cloud.

A bare hand.

Tingling with shock at such wanton exposure, he looked away quickly. "I'll have to—uh—may I use your transplat?"

"It's better than walking," she said and smiled. "It's over there." A long bare arm appeared, carrying a pointing finger. The arm

was retracted and there was a small fumbling at the door-latch. "I'll show you."

"No!" How could this creature forget that—that she wasn't decently covered? "I'll find it." He floundered against the drapes, fumbled along them, at last threw one away from the dial pedestal. With his back firmly toward her, he said, "I have no tokens with me."

"Do you *have* to go?"

"Yes!"

She laughed, "Well, either way, be my guest."

"Thanks," he managed. "I'll—uh—send—" he began to dial busily and carefully, to avoid another wrong number—"send it to when I as soon as good of you three *five*."

Averting his eyes, he stood on the transplat. She was still inside her cubicle, thank the powers. Then he remembered that he hadn't the slightest idea of the number he had mistakenly dialed; although it had stared him in the face on her dialpost, he had been too distraught to read it.

"Oh, I didn't get your number!" he said hoarsely, but the familiar flicker of total blackness had come and gone, and he was standing on the transplat inside the office of J. & D. Walsh, waving his hand stupidly at Corsonmay, the oldish receptionist with the youngish hair.

"My number?" Corsonmay echoed. Appallingly, she giggled. "Why, Roan *Walsh*, I never!" Under the privacy hood, her hands flickered. As he passed her desk, she pressed upon him a slip of paper. "It's really a very easy one to remember," she simpered.

He wordlessly stepped to his door. It slid back. He entered and, while it was closing behind him, hurled the paper violently at the disposal slot. "*Blossom!*" he cursed and slumped into his chair.

"Roan, step in here a moment!" snarled the grille above him.

"Yes, Private!" Roan gasped out.

He sat for a moment, drawing deep breaths as if the extra oxygen would somehow give him the right words to say. Then he rose and approached a side panel, which slid open for him. His father sat glowering at him. His father was dressed exactly as he was, exactly as Hallmay and Corsonmay and Walshmam and everyone else in the world was, except—but don't think about *her* now, whatever happens!

Private Walsh swung his glower, beard and all, across Roan, then slipped his gloved hands under the privacy hood and studied them thoughtfully. Though Roan could not see them, he knew they were held with the fingers decently together, as unlike living things as possible.

“I am not pleased,” said Private Walsh.

What now? Roan wondered hopelessly.

“There is more to a business than making profits,” said the bearded man. “There is more to this business than moving goods. It is not a large business, but an arch’s key is not necessarily a large stone. The transportation platform—” he droned, using the device’s formal name as if the service wore a mitred hat—“is the keystone of our entire culture, and this firm is the keystone of the transplat industry. Our responsibilities are great. *Your* responsibilities are great. A position such as yours requires certain intangibles over and above your ability to make out manifests. Integrity, boy, reliability—respect for privacy. And, above all, personal honor and decency.”

Roan, having heard this many times before, wrenched his features into an expression of penitence.

“One of the first indications of a gentleman—and to be a good businessman, one must be a good man, and the best of good men is a gentleman—one of the first ways of detecting the presence of a gentleman in our midst, I say, is to ask oneself this question: “Is he punctual?” Private Walsh leaned so far forward that his beard audibly brushed the privacy hood. The sound made Roan’s flesh creep. “You were late this morning!”

Roan had a hysterical impulse to blurt, “Well, you see, I stopped off at a girl’s place on the way and had a chat with her while she waved her bare arm ...” But even hysteria yielded to his conditioning. And then his mind began to work again.

“Private,” he said sorrowfully, “I *was* late. I can explain—” he heard the intake of breath and raised his voice slightly—“but I cannot excuse and will not try.” The breath slid out again. Roan stepped backward one step. “With your permission, then, Byepry.”

“Bye nothing. What is this explanation?”

This had better be good, Roan told himself. He put his hand behind him. He knew this, with face downcast, added to his

penitent appearance.

"I awoke this morning caught up with a great idea," he said. "I think I have found an *economy*."

"If you have," rumbled the beard, "it's been hiding from me."

"Each load of freight we transplat carries a man with it. This man does nothing but hold the manifest in his hand and look up the receiver's clerk at the arrival point. My plan is to eliminate that man."

"You awoke with this in mind?"

"Yes, Private," Roan lied, still marveling at his mental resourcefulness.

"And thinking about it delayed you?"

"Yes, Private."

"Since you were apparently fated to be late in any case," the old man said acidly, "you'd have done better to stay asleep. You would have wasted less of your time—and mine."

Roan knew enough to keep his mouth shut.

"In the history of matter transmission," said his father, "nine shipments have gone astray. The consequences are appalling. I shall assign you to read the history of these nine cases and memorize the figures. In one such case—the arrival of one hundred and twelve cubic meters of pig-iron in a private house measuring eighty-four meters—the results were spectacularly expensive."

"But that can't happen now!"

"No, it can't," admitted Private Walsh. "Not since the capacity-lock, which prevents the shipment of any volume to a smaller one. But there is still room for some gruesome possibilities, as in the Fathers of Leander case, when two hundred female assembly workers were sent, in error, into the monastery of this silent order. The damages—first degree violation of privacy, you know—were quadrupled for the particular aggravation and multiplied by the number of Fathers and novitiates. Eight hundred and fourteen, if I remember correctly, and I do."

"Now, the employment of a properly trained operator would have reduced the presence of these females in that building to a matter of tenths of a second and the damages accordingly. The shipment would have been returned to its source almost before it had arrived. As long as such things can occur, the wages paid these operators are cheap insurance indeed." He paused

ironically. "Is there anything else you want to suggest?"

"If you please, Private," Roan said formally, "I am acquainted with these matters. My suggestion was this—that phone contact be made with the receiving party when the shipment is ready—that our bonded transplat operator dial seven of the eight digits necessary—and that the final impulse be activated at the receiving point by audio or video, or even by a separate beamed radio, which we could supply to our regular customers or deliver by messenger a few minutes before the main shipment."

It got very quiet in the office.

"You see," said Roan, pressing his advantage, "if the final shipping orders come from the receiver himself, it is difficult to imagine how anyone else could possibly receive the load."

This silence was longer, and was ended by a sound from the beard precisely as if the old man had bitten into an olive pit. "You mentioned a messenger for the impulse-device. Where's your saving?"

"Most of our trade is with regular customers. Each of these could be given his own machine."

Silence.

Roan all but whispered, "An exclusive service of J. & D. Walsh."

"Well!" said Private Walsh. It was the most unreadable syllable Roan had ever heard. "This is not a suggestion, nor the consequence of anything specific which may or may not have happened; it is purely a request for a private opinion. Which strikes you as more—shall we say euphonious—J. & D. Walsh & Son, or J., D. & R. Walsh?"

Roan felt one of his fingernails bite through his glove as he clasped his hands behind him. He hoped his voice would not shake when he answered. "I could not presume to express an opinion on such a matter to one as familiar with ..." and, beyond that, his voice would not go.

He flashed a glance at his father, and almost extraneously it occurred to him that if the old man ever smiled, he might not be able to see it at all through the beard. Chalk yet one more advantage up to the enviable state of being head of a family.

He thought for a moment that his father was about to say something pleasant, but the impossibility remained impossible,

and the old man merely nodded at the door. "You're expected at my Mam's this evening," he said curtly. "Be prompt there, at least."

It stung, and the old man followed it up. "Lying abed immersed in company problems, even if they are of doubtful value, speaks well of an employee's devotion to his work. Unpunctuality speaks badly of it. A Private—" he squared his shoulders—"can be on time *and* be inspired."

Roan lowered his chin another notch and shuffled backward to the panel. It opened. He went through. When the panel clicked home, Roan leaped straight up in the air, his whole being filled with a silent shout. *The partnership! He's going to shake loose that gorgeous, beautiful, blossomy old partnership!* His gloved hands pounded silently and gleefully together. *Oh, Roan, you dog you, how do you do it? What makes that fuzzy head of yours tick when you get in a jam? Oh, you're a—*

He stopped, his mouth slack and his eyes abulge. There on his desk, in precisely the same pose, sat the golden-haired vision he had seen during the night and whose number he had dialed by error in the morning.

She was dressed—if one could call it dressed—in a long garment which fell from her throat and cascaded softly around her, rolling and folding and completely unlike the wrinkle-free, metrical cone-thrust-in-a-cone of conventional garb. Her arms were entirely bare and so, incredibly, were the feet which peeped out from under the flowing hem. She sat with both hands crossed on one knee and regarded him gravely. She smiled and was for a second transparent—and then she vanished.

Roan saw people and huge cargoes vanish every day—but not sixty meters from the nearest transplat! And not people indecently clad in outlandish fabrics which fell close to the body instead of standing properly away from it!

There was a heat in his face, and he became aware that he had not breathed in—how long? There was a straining ache about him and he realized that, at some point in his extraordinary experience, he had slumped to his knees on the carpet.

He got shakily to his feet and let himself be preoccupied with the reflex of adjusting his pantalets. They were neat and glossy and perfectly cylindrical, and not at all like the delicate pink

taper of her—her limb. She'd had toes, too. Had it ever occurred to him before to wonder if women had toes? Surely not! Yet they had. *She had.*

Then reaction struck him and he staggered to his desk.

His first lucid thought was to wonder what this vision would look like properly clad and he found that he could not possibly imagine it. He found, further, that he did not want to imagine it, and he descended into a scalding shame at the discovery. Oh, cried every ounce of upbringing within him, the Private was right in withholding the partnership for so long; he'd be so wrong in trusting me with it! What am I, he sobbed silently, what horrible thing am I?

II

Private Whelan Quinn

Quinn and Glass,

Level 4

Matrix 124-10-9783.

Honored Private:

In reference to yours of the seventeenth instant, we regret to inform you that the supply of chromium-plated ventilator girls is, at the moment, insufficient to complete the minimum mass for transplat shipment to you, which must total two toes. However, knowing that you use prefab paneling in considerable amounts, we are prepared to make up the weight in standard sheets if this is marriageable to you. We have the material in white, gold, dream and ivory. Please inform the undersigned as soon as possible if a doctor would be of any help.

Yours in Privacy,

Roan stared dully at the words which glowed on the voicewriter screen, his hand hovering over the SEND button of his telefax. He was wondering mistily whether that line about radiator grilles was quite right when the annunciator hummed.

“Yes?”

Corsonmay's giggly voice then emerged. “Greenbaum Grofast

just called, Roan Walsh. Query on a 'fax transmitted at 1013 from your matrix. They want to know what is meant by item eleven on it."

"What's item eleven?"

"It says here, 'smiling toenails.' "

"Whatever it means, it's wrong. Is there a price on the item?"

"Just a blank."

"Then it doesn't matter. Tell them to cancel the line and up-number the other items. You could have thought of that."

"I'm sawrrree," she said in such a disgustingly ingratiating tone that, had she been in the room with him, he would certainly have bashed her head clear down to her bedroom—no, *backbone*.

"Listen," he snapped, "lift the copy of every 'fax I've sent out since I got here this morning and bring them in."

Roan growled. The shot of adrenalin his irritation yielded up cleared his mind and his vision, and he stared appalled at the letter on his screen. Shuddering, he cleared it. He could just see old Quinn puzzling out "*if this is marriageable to you.*" Further, he could see the deep, secret ripples at the base of his father's beard, if by any chance Quinn happened to check through to him.

Corsonmay minced in with a sheaf of copies. "This one says—"

"Give me those. Byemay," he rapped.

"Well, bye." At the panel, she stopped and said solicitously, "Roan Walsh, you look—I mean is there anything ..."

"Byemay!" he roared.

She gulped. "You could tell *me*." Then her eyes widened as she watched his face. That odd, detached part of himself which irrepressibly wondered about such things wondered now just what expression he was wearing. Whatever it was, it blew her out of the office as if the room were a cannon and she the shell.

He looked at the top sheet. '*... your question as to how many support poles in a lading ton. The clerk in charge will supply the information. What is her number anyway?*' Then there was another reference to gold, this time *with the light behind it*, and a fantastic paragraph about shipping a generator *complete with ankling bolts*.

Going through the sheets, the most recent first, he was relieved to see that his preoccupation had noticeably affected only the last four messages. He settled himself down to a grim and careful enunciation of the corrections, worded with apologies but without explanations, checked them carefully and sent them.

Then he destroyed the copies he had corrected.

When he straightened up, his face was flushed and his head spun. Noon already. Thank the powers for that.

Then he saw the note on his desk, at the corner on which the vision had appeared. In beautiful firm calligraphy was a transplat number—nothing more.

Hussy!

But he put it in his pocket.

On the way out, he said to Corsonmay, without looking at her, “Won’t be back today. Field work.”

“Oh, but you’re not scheduled for—”

Before she could finish, he whirled and glared at her. She gulped so hard, he had the mad conviction that she was about to swallow her own lips. He strode to the dialpost, spun a number and got out of there.

He stood for a moment under the sky—well, under the metal-glas canopy—drinking in the sights of Grosvenor Center. There were shops and a restaurant and a library, and a theater as well, an immense structure honeycombed from top to bottom with its one-seat cells and one-man screens. Something called *The Glory of Stasis* was playing. He remembered the reviews—a two-hour prose poem dedicated to the fantasy of eternal afternoons, permanent roses and everlasting youthfulness. He should see it, he thought. After all, wasn’t that what he needed—a reaffirmation in the permanence of things and his place in this eternal society?

How comforting the Center was! People moved from one shop to another, not hurrying, not idling, each as sure of where he was going as where he had come from. Each dressed alike, walked alike, the rectangular feet unhesitating, the tubular limbs alternating, the cone-in-cone clothing never rippling, never draping, never clinging close to bodies ...

He shook himself.

... And concealed under the decent capes, stockinged hands were folded, unused until needed—just as Godmade as a bird’s wing—and hidden when they worked, as all working mechanisms were housed. And as far as the eye could see them, these sane folk were identifiable, correct. One was never in doubt, for that smooth-faced one was a Bachelor like himself, and the long hair

yonder was a May, and the bound hair a Mam, and the bearded ones were Privates.

Noble title, Private—constant reminder of the great principle of Privacy, which was the very essence of all order. It was born, he had been taught, of the people themselves when, in the days of the barbarities, they had formed great armies—millions upon millions of just people in a single organization—and their majority were called Private. Magnificent then and magnificent today.

He saw the bank of transplats and felt a surge of pride. Someone had used the term “keystone.” A good one. For the transplat covered the Earth like a great clean cape, standardizing language, dress, customs and ambitions. Every spot on Earth was but a step and a split-second away from every other, and all resources lay ready for the seeking glove. He had been curious enough, at one time, to attempt an orientation in geographic distances. He soon gave it up as profitless. What did it matter that the company offices were in Old New Mexico and his home near what had once been called Philadelphia? Could it be important that Corsonmay arrived each morning from Deutsch Polska and Hallmay, the Private’s secretary, slept each night in Karachi?

The population was stabilized below its resources. Why, there was enough copper to supply power fuel for seven centuries—copper which, so they said, was once used to carry feeble little pulses of electricity. And when the copper was gone, it would be simple enough to synthesize more. Food—filthy, necessary, secret stuff—was no longer a problem. And for delicacies of mind and heart, there were the spaceships, roaring away to the stars and returning years later, carrying strange fossils and odd stones, after having traveled every laborious inch out and every inch back again, aging their crews and enriching the world.

Once, he knew, there had been talk of interplanetary transplat, but it was now unshakably established that the effect was possible only in a gravitic field of planetary “viscosity.” Once the immense task of establishing the dial central was finished, the system could be extended anywhere on a planet, but never between them. And a good thing, too, as his father had explained to him. What would happen to the beautifully balanced cultural structure if humanity were suddenly free to scatter through the

Universe as it now scattered over the Earth? And why leave? What could there possibly be for anyone—except a crazy spaceman—off Earth?

He had read this, too: *A species which can build perfection as fast as we have done is a species capable of maintaining perfection forever.* It took fifteen thousand years to populate the Earth and then explode it in a mighty war. It took half a thousand years to concentrate the few hundred thousand survivors in Africa, the only continent left in which men could live. It took the African Colony six hundred years to reach the transplat stage in its technology. But *that* was only a hundred and fifty years back. The transplat built cities in days, floated them on impervious bedplates and shielded them with radiation-proof domes when necessary. People could settle anywhere—and they did. People could work the Earth for its resources almost anywhere—and they did.

Roan sighed, feeling much better. He looked away from the calm but busy Center and idly took in what could be seen of the horizon. There a snow-capped mountain hung like a cloud, and yonder was blue water as far as the eye could see. He wondered what mountain it might be, what sea; and then he laughed. It was all the same to a man, all the same to humanity.

He paced out the Center, from one end to the other, delighted, proud. He was young and vital and marriageable—perhaps all such as he suffered from the equivalent of his blonde apparition when that time of life came upon them. Marriage, after all, held certain animal mysteries, and like those of his flower-shop, where he cleaned his body and teeth and stoked himself with food concentrates, they just could not be discussed. He would wait and see; when the time came, the mysteries would be explained, even as had all the others.

He came out into the walkway loving everybody, even, for a moment, Granny.

Granny! He stopped and closed his eyes, his face twisted. He'd very nearly forgotten about her. Well, she could blossom well wait. He'd had a bad time this morning and the very thought of Granny then had been unbearable. Who, in the throes of self-abasement, wanted contact with a veritable monolith of respectability? And who, having regained his respectability,

needed the monolith? Either way, the visit was insupportable. He'd make his sister Valerie go. Someone from the family had to make the visit once a week. Why, he didn't know and had never asked. Let Valerie do it. What was the use of having a sister if you couldn't get her to do the dirty work once in a while?

He crossed the walkway, went to the phone banks and dialed Valerie's number after a glance at his watch. She should be back at work from noonrest by now.

She was. As soon as she saw his face, she said, "Roan Walsh, if you're calling up to palm that visit to Granny off on *me*, you have another think coming. I do my duty by the family and I'm blessed if I can see why I should do any more than my duty or why you should do any less, so don't even say a word about it." He opened his mouth, but before anything came out of it, she said, "And don't be late either. And especially, don't be early."

Roan opened his mouth again, but the screen went blank.

Out in the filtered sunlight again, he let the chagrin fade and the amusement grow. It grew into something rare in Roan—an increasing glow of heady resentment and conscious command. How did these magnificent human beings get so magnificent in the first place? Why, by asking if everything was all right, or if it weren't—and, if it weren't, then they changed things until it was. Now everything was all right with him, except this Granny business. Then ask the question—why should he go see Granny? Because someone always had to. That was no answer. Put it another way, then—what would happen if he just didn't go?

He strode buoyantly down the walkway, beaming fiercely at the passersby, and the wonderful thought defeated him in exactly seven minutes, twenty seconds. Because the answer to 'What if he just didn't go?' was:

From Mam, that hurt look and then an avalanche of "understanding."

From Val, a silent, holier-than-thou waspishness, day after day.

And from the Private, thunder and lightning. And no partnership. Well, buds with the partnership!

At this point, he stopped walking. What did you do when you walked out on your family's business?

He'd never known anyone who had. Where did you go? What did you do?

His other, inner self said, banteringly, *Aw, come off it. Are you going to kick over the Cosmos to save yourself sixty minutes with the old woman?*

Roan said nothing to that. So the voice added, *What have you got against Granny, anyway?*

"She bothers me," Roan said aloud. He turned and went into a decorator.

What for? demanded the inner Roan.

"To buy something for Granny," he replied. And the inner voice, damn its stinking stamens, chuckled and said, *Know what, Roan? You're a crawling coward.*

"Why can't you be on my side for once?" he demanded, but its only answer was a snigger so smug that even his sister Valerie might have envied it.

The decorator was an old bachelor with a fierce countenance. Roan bought roses and hybrid jonquils, paid for them and started out. Suddenly he went back, prodded by his weird questioning mood, and said, "What did they call a place where you buy roses before they called it a decorator?"

The man uttered a soprano nickering which, Roan deduced, was laughter. He leaned across the counter and, looking over each of his shoulders in turn, said in a shrill whisper, "Flower shop." He clung to the counter and twisted up his face until the tears spurted.

Roan waited patiently until the man calmed down and then asked, "Well, then, why do they call the you-know-what a flower shop?"

This seemed to sober the man. He scratched his pale, cropped head. "I don't know. I guess because, whatever they called it before, people used to make jokes and cuss-words about it. Like now with—with Flower Shops."

Roan shuddered. Its motivation was beyond definition for him, but with it came a feeling of having taken a ludicrous path to a great truth, and somehow he knew he would never joke or swear about flower shops again. Or, for that matter, about whatever new name they gave the plumbing after they got through with muddying up this one. For this much he could say aloud, "There ought to be something else to curse and make jokes about."

The man's fierce face yielded for a moment to puzzlement, and

then he shrugged. To Roan, it was a disgusting gesture and an alarming one, the one his father had made years ago, when Roan's tongue was a little more firmly attached to his curiosity than it had been of late. It was transplat this and transplat that, until he had suddenly asked his father how the thing worked. The Private had stopped dead, hesitated, then shrugged just that way. It was a gesture which said, "That's how things are, that's all."

On the way to the transplats, Roan stopped where people clustered. There was a shop there dealing in, according to its sign, FAD AND FASHION. Having passed through a number of engrossing fads in his life—Whirlstick and Chase and Warp and, once, a little hand loom on which he had woven a completely useless strip of material twice his length and two fingers wide—he stopped to see what people were buying.

It was a motion-picture of white-gloved hands manipulating two thick needles and a sort of heavy thread. No one would have dared to do such a thing in the open, but the picture was acceptable, though giggle-making.

On a shelf at waist height were many samples of the fabric which seemed to be the product of this exercise. He stepped forward until his cape covered enough of the shelf for him to pick up a piece of the material.

It was loosely woven, with a paradoxical texture, very rough, yet very soft.

It fell on and around his hand and draped away like—like ...

"What is it? What's this called?" he blurted.

A woman next to him said, "They call it knitting."

III

He skipped to the laFarge yards and Kimberley, Danbury Marble and Krasniak, checking inventories and consulting accountants. He did it all without notes, which he had left in his office when he charged out at noon. He did it efficiently and he did it, without at first knowing why or even how, in the most superb cross-spoor fashion, so that, by quitting time, it would take far more trouble than it was worth for the office to discover he had used the first two hours of the afternoon for his own purposes.

This small dishonesty troubled him more than a little. Honor was part of the decency-privacy-perfection complex, and yet, to a degree, it seemed to be on the side of good business and high

efficiency to operate without it. Did this mean that he was not and could not be what his father called a gentleman? If not, how much did it matter?

He decided it didn't matter, cursed silently and jovially at the inner voice which sneered at him, and went to see his grandmother.

There was very little difference between one transplat court and another. A business might have a receptionist and homes might have a larger or smaller facility, but with the notable exception of the blonde's apartment in his dream—surely it *was* a dream—when he first found walls covered with drapes, he had never noticed much difference between courts.

Granny's, however, always gave him a special feeling of awe. If it could be found anywhere on Earth, here, right here in this court, was the sum and symbol of their entire culture—neat, decent, *correct*.

He stepped off the transplat and went to the dialpost to check the time, and was pleased. He could hardly have been any more punctual.

There was a soft sound and a panel stood open. It was the same one as always and he wondered, as he had many times before, about the other rooms in Granny's house. He would not have been surprised if they all proved to be empty. What could she need but her rectitude, her solitude and a single room?

He entered and stood reverently. Granny, all ivory and white wax, made a slight motion with her hooded eyes and he sat opposite her. Between them was a low, bare table.

"Great Mam," he said formally, "good Stasis to you."

"Hi," she said quaintly. "How you doing, boy?" For all his patient irritation with Granny, as always he felt the charm of her precise, archaic speech. Her voice was loud enough, clear enough, but always had the quality of a distant wind. "You look like you hoed a hard row."

Roan understood, but only because of many years of experience with her odd phrasing. "It's not too bad. Business."

Tell me about it." The old woman lived in some hazy, silent world of her own, separated incalculably in time and space from the here and now, and yet she never failed to ask this question.

He said, "Just the usual ... I've brought you something." From

the pocket under his cape, he took the decorations he had bought, twisted the tube which confined them and handed the explosion of roses and daffodils to her. The other package clattered to the table.

There was the demure flash of a snowy glove and she had the stems. She put her face down into the fragrant mass and he heard her breath whisper. "That was very kind," she said. "And what's this?" She popped the wrapping and peeped down between the edge of the table and the hem of her cape to see. "*Knitting!* I didn't know anyone remembered knitting. Used to be just the thing for the old folk, when I was a sprout like you. Sit in the sun and rock and knit, waiting for the end."

"I thought you'd like it." He caught the slight movement of her shoulders and heard the snap of the wrappings as she closed the package again and slid it to the undershelf.

They beamed at each other and she asked him, "Aren't you working too hard? You look—well, you were going to tell me about the business."

He said, "It's about the same. Oh, I had an idea this morning and told the Private about it. I think he's going to use it. He was pleased. He talked about the partnership."

"That's fine, boy. What was the idea?"

She wouldn't understand. But he told her anyway, choosing his words carefully, about his plan to eliminate the transplat operators. She nodded gravely as he spoke, and at one point he had a mad impulse to start making up nonsense technological terms out of his head, just to see if she'd keep nodding. She would; it was all the same to her. She was just being polite.

He restrained himself and concluded, "So, if it works out, it will be a real economy. There just wouldn't be any way for a shipment to go astray the way—" he almost blurted out the story of the arrival of the passenger van at the monastery, and caught himself just in time; the old lady would have been shocked to death—"the way some have in the past."

"I reckon they couldn't," she agreed, nodding as if she understood. He ought to return her courtesy, he thought, and said, "And what has occupied you, Great Mam?"

"I do wish you'd keep calling me Granny," she said, a shade of petulance creeping into the weary whisper. "What have I been doing? What might I be doing at my age? Know how old I am,

Roan?”

He nodded.

“A hundred and eighty-three come spring,” she said, ignoring him. “I’ve seen a lot in my time. The stories I could tell you ... Did you know I was born in the Africa Colony?”

He nodded again, and again she ignored him. “Yes indeedly, I was about your age when all this started, when the transplat broke the bubble we lived in and scattered us all over the world.”

Yes, you saw it happen! he thought, for the first time fully realizing something he had merely known statistically before. *You saw folk dancing chest to chest and having food together and no one thinking a thing about it. You knew the culture before there was any real privacy or decency—you, who are the most private and decent of people today. The stories you could tell? Oh, yes—couldn’t you, though! What did they call them before they called them ‘flower shops’?*

Certain she couldn’t conceivably divine his motivations, he asked, “What did people do then, Granny? I mean—today, if you could name one single job all of us had to do, it would be keeping the perfection we have. Could you say that you folks had any one thing like that?”

Her eyes lighted. Granny had the brightest eyes and the whitest, soundest teeth of anyone he knew. “Sure we had.” She closed her eyes. “Can’t say we thought much about perfection—not in the early days. I think the main job was the next step up.” “The next step up,” she repeated, savoring the phrase. “You know, Roan, what we have today—well, we’re the first people in human history that wasn’t working on that, one way or another. They’d ought to teach human history nowadays. Yes, they should. But I guess most folks wouldn’t like it. Anyway, folks always wanted to be a bit better in those days.

“Sometimes they stopped dead a couple hundred years and tried to make their souls better, and sometimes they forgot all about their souls and went ahead gettin’ bigger and faster and tougher and noisier. Sometimes they were real wrong and sometimes they did right just by accident; but all the time they worked and worked on that next step up. Not now,” she finished abruptly.

“Of course not. What would we do with a step up? What would we step up to?”

She said, “Used to be when nobody believed you could stop progress. A grass seed can bust a piece of granite half in two, you know. So can a cup o’ water if you freeze it in the right place.”

“We’re different,” he said smugly. “Maybe that’s the real difference between us and other kinds of life. We can stop.”

“You can say that again.” He did not understand her inflection. Before he could wonder about it, she said, “What do you know about psi, Roan?”

“Psi?” He had to search his mind. “Oh—I remember it. Fad and Fashion was selling it a couple of years ago. I thought it was pretty silly.”

“*That!*” she said, with as much scorn as her fragile, distant-wind voice could carry. “That was a weejee-board. That thing’s older’n anyone knows about. It didn’t deserve the name of psi. Well, look here—for ten thousand years, there’ve been folks who believed that there was a whole world of powers of the mind—telepathy, telekinesis, teleportation, clairvoyance, clairsaudience ... lots more. Never mind, I’m not going to give you a lecture,” she said, her eyes suddenly sparkling.

He realized that he had essayed a yawn—just a small one—with his mouth closed, and that she had caught him at it. He flushed hotly. But she went right on.

“All I’m saying is this—there’s plenty of proof of this power if you know where to look. One mind talks to another, a person moves in a blink from place to place without a transplat, a mind moves material things, someone knows in advance what’s going to happen—all this by mind power. Been going on for thousands of years. All that time, nobody understood it—and now nobody needs to. But it’s still around.”

He wondered what all this had to do with the subject at hand. As if she had heard him wonder, she said, “Now you wanted to know what the next step up might be, in case anybody was interested. Well, that’s it.”

“I can’t see that as a step upward,” he said, respectfully but positively. “We already do move things—speak over distances—all those things you mentioned. We even know what’s going to happen next. Everything is arranged that way. What good would it be?”

“What good would it be to move the operators off the transplats?”

"Oh, that's an economy."

"What would you call it if telekinesis and teleportation moved goods and people without the transplat?"

"*Without the transplat?*" he almost shouted. "But you—but we —"

"We'd all be in the same boat with those operators you're replacing."

"The op—I never thought about them!"

She nodded.

Shaken, he mused, "I wonder why the Private never thought of that when I told him about it this morning."

There was a dry, delighted sound from deep in the old chest. "He wouldn't. He never did understand how anything works. He just rides it."

Roan controlled himself. One did not listen to criticism of one's parents. But this was Great Mam herself. The effort for control helped bring the whole strange conversation into perspective and he laughed weakly. "Well, I hardly think we're going to have any such—economy—as that."

She raised her eyebrows. "This progress we were talking about. You know, even in my time most folks had the idea that humans planned human progress. But when you come to think of it, the first human who walked upright didn't do it because he wanted to. He did it because he already could." When she saw no response on his face, she added, "What I mean is that *if* the old-timers were right and progress *can't* be corked up, then it's just going to bust loose. And if it busts loose, it's going to do it whether you're the head of J. & D. Walsh or a slag-mucker, whether you're happy about it or not."

"Well, I don't think it will happen."

"Haven't you been listening to me? It's *always* been with us."

"Then why didn't they—why should it show up now and not a thousand years from now?"

"We never stopped progressing before—not like this," she said, with a sweeping glance at the walls and ceiling which clearly indicated the entire planet.

"Granny, do you *want* this to happen? *You?*"

"What I want doesn't matter. There've always been people who had—powers. All I'm suggesting is that now, of all times, is the moment for them to develop—now that we don't develop in any

other way.”

He was persistent. “You think it’s a good thing, then?”

She hesitated. “Look at me, how old I am. Is that a good thing? It doesn’t matter—it happened—it had to happen.”

“Why have you told me this?” he whispered.

“Because you asked me what was occupying me,” she said, “and I figured to tell you, for a change. Frighten you?”

Sheepishly, he nodded.

She did, too, and laughed. “Do you good. In my day, we were frightened a whole lot. It took us a long way.”

He shook his head. *Do you good?* He failed to see what good could come of any so-called “progress” that threatened the transplat. Why, what would happen to things? What would happen to their very way of life—to privacy itself, if anyone could—what was it, teleport?—teleport into a man’s office or cubicle ...

“Look, boy, you don’t have to wait until it’s your turn, to come chat with your old Granny, you know. Come over anytime you have something to talk about. Just let me know first, that’s all.”

There was nothing in life he wanted less than another session like this one, but he remembered to thank her. “Byemam.”

“Byeboy.”

He rushed out to the dialpost and feverishly got the number of his home. He stepped up on the platform and the last he saw of Granny’s face through the open panel was her expression of—was it pity?

Or perhaps compassion was a better name for it.

IV

He went straight to his cubicle, brushing past his sister as she stood at the edge of the court. He thought she was going to speak, but deliberately showed his back and quickened his stride. Her kind of smugness, her endless, placid recitations of her day’s occupations, were the prime thing he could do without at the moment. He needed privacy, lots of it, and right now.

He leaned back against the panel when it closed. His head spun. It was a head which had the ability to thrust indigestible ideas into compartments, there to seal them off from one another until he had time to ruminate. This was how he was able to handle so many concurrent business affairs. It was also how he

had been able to get through this extraordinary day—till then. But the compartments were full; nothing else must happen.

He had awakened before daylight to see, in the soft glow of the walls, a girl in a flowing garment who regarded him gravely. Her hair had been golden and her hands were clasped over one knee. He had not been able to see her feet—not then.

He had stepped on the 'plat to get to the office and had arrived, instead, in an unmentionable place containing drapes and this same girl. She had spoken to him.

He had seen her again, perched on his desk.

He had lost two hours in an unwonted self-examination, which had left him bewildered and unsure of himself, and had gone most respectably to see his most respectable grandmother, who had filled him full of the most frightening conjectures he had ever experienced—including the one which brought this mad business full circle. For she had suggested to him that, by a force called tele-something-or-other, certain people might appear just anywhere, transplat or no transplat.

He snorted. You didn't need a transplat to have a dream! He had dreamed the girl here and in the draped court. He had dreamed her in the office. "There!" he said to himself. "Feel better?"

No.

Anyone who had dreams like that had to be off his 'plat.

All right: they *weren't* dreams.

In which case, Granny was right; someone had something so much better than a transplat that the world—his world—would come to an end. If only this were a technological development, it could be stopped, banned, to maintain the Stasis. But it wasn't—it was some weird, illogical, uncontrollable mystery known to only certain people *and he, Roan, wasn't one of them.*

It was unthinkable, insupportable. Indecent!

Going into his flower shop, he reached for his dinner ration. He grunted in surprise, for instead of the usual four tablets and tumbler of vitabroth, his hand fell on something hot, slightly greasy and fibrous. He lifted it, turned it over. It was like nothing edible he had ever seen before. On the other hand, there had been innovations from time to time, as the Nutrient Service saw fit to allow for this or that change in the environment, the

isolation of mutated bacteria and their antibiotics, the results of their perpetual inventory of sample basals.

But this thing was far too big to be swallowed. Maybe, he thought suddenly, it was a combination of nutrients and roughage.

His teeth sank readily into it. Hot, reddish juice dribbled down his chin and a flavor excruciatingly delectable filled his mouth and throat, his nostrils and, it seemed, his very eyes. It was so good, it made his jaw-hinges ache.

He demolished the entire portion before it had a chance to get cold, then heaved a marveling sigh. He fumbled about the food-shelf in the vain hope of finding more—but that was all, except for the usual broth. He lifted the cup, then turned and carefully poured it down the sink. Nothing was going to wash that incredible flavor out of his mouth as long as he could help it.

He slipped into his dressing shield and changed rapidly. As he transferred his wallet, he paused to glance into it to see if it needed replenishing.

He grunted with the impact of memory. As he had left the Private's office, he had come face to face with his—with that—well, dream or no, there she had been. And had disappeared. And on the corner of his desk, just where she had sat, had been the 'plat number—*this* number, here in his hand.

Like the dream she was—wasn't she?—the girl had not spoken to him here in his cubicle or in the office. But in the draped court she had. That episode, improbable as it seemed, could hardly have been a dream. He had dialed that transplat to get there. He might have misdialed, but he had been wide awake when he did it.

She must be one of those—those next-step-upward monsters Granny was talking about, he decided. He had to know, had to speak to her again. Not because of her hair, of course, or the brazen garment. It was because of the transplat, because of the hard-won Stasis that held society together. It was a citizen's simple duty to his higher pink toes. No, his higher self.

He adjusted a fresh pair of gloves and strode out to the court. Valerie was still there, looking wistful.

"Roan!"

"Later," he barked, already spinning the dial.

"Please! Only a minute!"

"I haven't got a minute," he snapped and stepped up on the platform. The flicker of blackness cut off her pleading.

He stepped down from his arrival platform and stopped dead.

No drapes! No perfume! No—oh, holy Private in Heaven!

"Roan Walsh!" squeaked Corsonmay. The secretary's eyeballs all but stood out on her dry cheekbones. Under them, her hands—decently gloved, thank the powers—were pressed, and in her hair obscenely hung a comb which, he deduced, he had interrupted in midstroke. He saw instantly what had happened, and a coruscation of fury and embarrassment spun dazzlingly inside him.

She must have seen him throw away the number she had written down for him and supplied him with another. And he had had to go and assume that it was ... oh, to expect the drapes, the arms, the—and all that—and to come face to face with *this!*

"Private!" she shrilled. "*Mam! Mam!*" Calling her parents. Well, of course. Any decent girl would.

He dived for the dialpost. So did she, but he got there first.

"Don't go, Roan Walsh," she panted. "Corsonmam and my father, they're not here, they would have been if only I'd known, they'll be back soon, so *please* don't go."

"Look," he said. "I found the number on my desk and I thought Grig Labine had left it there. I was supposed to see him and I'm late now. I'm sorry I invaded your privacy, but it was a mistake, see? Just a mistake."

The eagerness faded from her almost-wrinkled face and homely hot eyes. She seemed to shrink two inches in a tenth of a second. Her mouth pouted, wet and pathetic, and quivering puckers appeared at its sides. *Oh, you stinker, what did she ever do to you?* he said to himself.

"Be serene," he blurted. He dialed his home.

"Oh-h-h-h ..." her wail was cut off by the transplat.

He stood where he was, his eyes squeezed closed on his embarrassment, and breathed hard.

And then he became aware of a whimpering "Please ..." and, for one awful moment, thought Corsonmay's transplat had not operated. He opened his eyes cautiously and then sighed and stepped down. He was home. It was Valerie who was whimpering.

"Well, what's the matter with you?" he asked.

"Roan," she wept, "*please* don't be angry with me. I know I was a beast. It was just—oh, I meant it, but I didn't have to be so ..."

"What are you talking about?"

"When you called about wanting me to go to Granny's."

That seemed so long ago and so completely trivial. "Forget it, Val. You were absolutely right. I went, so forget it."

"You're not mad?"

"Of course I'm not."

"Well, I'm glad, because I want to talk to you. Can I?" she begged.

This was unusual. "What about?"

"Can we go out, Roan?"

"Where are the parents?"

"In the Family Room. We can be right back. Please, Roan," she pleaded.

He yielded. In his cosmos, Val was merely a perennial and harmless irritation; this was probably the first time he had consciously realized that she might be a person, too, with personal problems.

"Grosvenor Center?" he asked.

She nodded. He dialed it and stepped up on the platform and down again at Grosvenor. It was still daylight there and he wondered vaguely where on Earth it might be. The sea on one side was an evening blue, the mountaintop a glory.

Val appeared on the transplat and stepped down. They walked silently past the decorator and the Fad and Fashion and the restaurant until they reached the park. They sat down side by side on a bench, with its shoulder-high partitions between each seat, and looked at the fountain.

She was very pale and her shoulders were moving under the cape, a complex motion that was partly stifled sobs and partly the kneading of hands.

He said, as gently as he could, "What's up?"

"You don't like me."

"Aw, sure I do. You're all right."

"No, please don't like me. I don't *want* you to. I came to you because you don't like me."

This was completely incomprehensible to Roan. He decided that listening might extract more data than talking.

Valerie said in a low voice, "I've got to tell you something that would make you hate me if you didn't already, so that's why. Oh, Roan, I'm no *good!*"

He opened his mouth to deny this, but closed it silently. He had the wit not to agree with her, either.

"There's somebody I—saw. I have to see him again, talk with him. He's—I want—Oh!" she cried, and burst into tears.

Roan fumbled for a clean handkerchief and passed it deftly around the front of the partition, down low. He felt it taken from his fingers.

"A May's supposed to wait," she said brokenly, "and one day her Private will come looking for her, and he will be her Private, and she will be his help and service until the end. But I don't want to be help and service to the Private who comes. Who knows, one might come any minute. I want *this* one to come!"

"Maybe he will," soothed Roan. "Who is he?"

"I don't *know!*" she said in agony. "I only saw him. Roan, you have to find him for me."

"Well, where—"

"He's tall, as tall as you," she said hurriedly. "His eyes are green. He has—" she gulped and her voice sank—"long hair, only not like a May. And right on the bottom of his chin there's a little cleft and on one side—yes, on the left side—there's a little curl of a scar."

"Hair? Men don't have long hair!"

"*This* one has."

"Now look," he said, suppressing his laughter at the outlandish concept. "If there were such a man, long hair and all, *everybody'd* know where he is."

"Yes," she said miserably.

"So there you are. There's no such man."

"But there *is!* I saw him!"

"Where?" She was silent. He said impatiently, "If you don't tell me where, how can I find him?"

"I can't tell you," she said at last, painfully. "It doesn't matter—you'd never find him—there." She colored. "He must be somewhere else, too. Please find him, Roan. His name. Where he is. Even if he never—I'd like to know what his name is," she finished wistfully. She stood up. "The Private will miss us."

On the way back to the transplat, she said to the air straight in front of her, "You think I'm just awful, don't you?"

"No!" he said warmly. "Sometimes I think everyone's just a little different from what the Stasis expects. It isn't 'awful' to be a little different." And his subconscious, instead of objecting, dropped its prim jaw in astonishment.

V

The Family Room was the heart of their house, as such rooms were to every house on Earth. A chair—virtually a throne—dominated one wall. It held the video controls and the audio beams which came to audible focus in their proper places in the room—the miniature of the throne at the right wall, which was the place of the son of the house; the wooden bench at the left, which was the daughter's; and the small stool at the throne's foot, where the mother sat.

The room, because of its beams and its padded floor and acoustically dead walls and ceiling, was a silent one and it was the custom for each family to convene there for two hours at the end of the day. There were stylized prayers, such reading as the Private chose, whatever conversation he dictated and, when he was so moved, transmitted entertainment of his choice for the clan.

When Roan and Valerie entered, the original silence was compounded by towering disapproval. The Private's hand lay on the video control, which he had just switched off. The Mam's head had bobbed once, sideways, so engrossed had she been in the program; it was as if a prop had been snatched away.

Son and daughter separated and went to their places. Roan felt the old hovering terror as the Private's gaze flicked across his withers like a rowel. He sat down and glanced quickly at his sister. She huddled on her bench so oppressed, so indrawn, that even her wrinkle-free, foldless garments could not conceal her crushed look. Roan, with hands properly folded, swallowed apprehensively.

"Late," said the Private. "*Both* of you. This sort of thing can hardly help in my recommendations, Valerie, you unwanted creature." This was an idiom used in chastising all Mays and passed Valerie by. Then, to Roan, "One would assume that my generosity and forgiveness"—that would be a hint about the

partnership—“would result in at least a minimal effort not to repeat the offense. You are thirty years of age—old enough to know the difference between Stasis and chaos. You will be confined, by my personal lock, to your cubicle for forty-eight hours, where you may reflect on the consequences of disorganization. *Valerie!*”

She twitched and gave the proper response, which was to meet his eyes. Roan said nothing. In such occasions, there was no appeal.

“Valerie, were you and your brother together in whatever escapade it was that led you to flout the organization of this house?”

“Yes, Private, but it was really my—”

“Then you must bear the same punishment—not primarily for being tardy, which is not one of your habitual defects, but for your failure to use your influence on your irresponsible sibling. I assume you failed to try, since it would be too painful for me to conclude that both my offspring lacked the basic elements of decency.”

Another massive silence followed. The mother, sitting at his feet, rolled her eyes upward to the cushions, where his gloved hand lay. With a slight, unconscious movement, her ear sought the focal point of the currently nonexistent audio beam. The Private’s beard bulged as he dropped his glare upon her.

“And since I must cling to a single shred of satisfaction,” he said, “let it be my faith in *your* knowledge of correct behavior, Mam. Assuming that this knowledge exists, the circumstance clearly indicates that you too have not properly applied it. There will therefore be no video for you tonight.” He unleashed a semi-circular glare in which his beard smote across their presences like the back of a hand. “Leave me.”

They rose and shuffled out. The panel slid shut behind them. “I’m sorry.” Val barely breathed the apology.

“*Silence!*” roared the grille over the door.

They hung their heads and waited. Walshmam tiptoed away and returned in a moment with two small cubes. She led Valerie to her cubicle and stood aside. Valerie glanced once at Roan, who twitched a dismal smile at her. Then the panel slid shut on her and Walshmam pressed one of the cubes into its socket,

effectively sealing the door until removed again from this side. True to custom, Roan waited until she passed him and then shuffled along behind her to his own cubicle.

“And furthermore,” enounced the grille over the door, “I herewith refuse to consider the merits of the suggestion you made this morning. For, if good, it issues from an unworthy source and is tainted—if bad, it deserves no consideration.”

Walshmam seemed very sad, but then few Mams were anything else. Their lives alternated between silent patience and silent regret, with only an occasional flicker of preventive action. He grimaced in an effort to convey a certain camaraderie, but she misunderstood and looked away, and he knew she had taken it as a rebellious or unrepentant expression.

He wondered, as he dropped the dressing shield over his head, what would happen if he got up and hauled on the Private’s beard.

Reaching for his brief nightshirt and sleeping shorts and bedshoes, he told himself, “I bet he hasn’t even got anything in his rule-book to cover that. And he never was so good with a new idea.”

That reminded him of what Granny had said—the Private “never did understand how anything works. He just rides it.” He sure rides his family, Roan thought.

So he himself would be a Private some day, have a family and get it all back again, he thought sleepily, and let himself sink down and down into a place where he sat on a monstrous throne with a beard to his knees, and watched his father, who sat on the boy’s chair, weeping. At his feet was—well, for heaven’s sake, *it was Granny!*

At some point, it must have turned into a nightmare—a dreadful fragment involving being lost in the flicker of final black that one experienced on the transplat. Here, however, he was immersed in it, with dimensionless space at his freezing back and the unyielding “inner” surface of reality pressing into his face. He cried out and struggled—and thumped his cheekbone on solid rock. He yelped and pressed away from the rock and sat up.

Not an inch from his head was the lintel of a shimmering,

rectangular rock. Beyond it, a pale, green, alien sky which brightened by the moment.

He glanced behind him and saw nothing but purple plain, cracked and crevassed, from which cactuslike spears sprouted grotesquely.

He stepped through the doorway and, a few yards beyond, the desolation abruptly ended. Before him stretched rolling parkland, then a curving line of trees following a brook. Across the brook were fields—one brown, one tan, one a tender green—and they seemed, at this distance, as smooth as the surface of a cup of milk. To the right were mountains, one with a flaming cap so brilliant, his eyes stung. He recognized it as dawnlight on snow. To the left was a broad rolling valley. The air was warm but sparkling-fresh.

He paused and inhaled deeply, seeking comprehension, then saw, to his right, a boulder as big as a Private chair. On the boulder sat a girl with golden hair and strange eyes. She wore a belted singlet that revealed far more girl than Roan had ever seen before. She held one delicately bronzed, bare knee in both hands. Her bare feet acknowledged the snowfire pinkly, and they were wet with dew.

She laughed a greeting and rose and flowed over to him. "Come along," she said.

He clutched himself and hid his naked hands. With a swift, strong movement, she had his hands in hers.

"Up we go," she sang and, before he could think, she was leading him.

His cheek touched her bare shoulder. He smelled her perfume and her sweet breath, and his eyes rolled up and his knees sagged. Her arm went briefly round his shoulders and she laughed again.

"It's all right, it's only a dream," she told him.

"A dre—" he coughed—"eam?"

"Thirsty?" She held out her hand, and he started violently when a cup appeared in it. "Here you are."

He took it, hesitated, then raised it. She still stood, smiling at him. Modestly he turned his back and drank. It was bright orange, cold, sweet-acid and delicious. He patted his lips carefully and turned back, waving the cup helplessly.

"Throw it," she said.

“Th—what?”

She gestured. Obediently, he tossed the cup straight up. It vanished.

“Feel better? Come on, they’re all waiting for you.”

Gaping up at the spot into which the cup had vanished, Roan said, “I want to go home.”

“You can’t. Not until the dream’s finished.”

He put his arms straight down and fluttered his hands until the cuffs concealed them. “I want to go home,” he said forlornly.

“Why?”

“I just ...” He looked longingly over his shoulder at the doorway. When he looked back, she was gone. And suddenly, urgently, he wanted her back. He took a step forward.

“*Boo!*” she said, her lips just touching the nape of his neck. He whirled, and there she stood. “Where were you?”

“Here—anywhere.” She vanished and reappeared instantly at his right.

“Please,” he said, “don’t do that any more. And just let me stand here quietly for a minute.”

“All right.” She wandered away, picked a snowdrop and a strange green-and-purple flower, added a fern-frond and came back toward him, her fingers deft and a-dance. She held out the flowers, woven into a tiny circular wreath, and spun them on her finger. Then she set them into her golden hair.

“Pretty?”

“Yes.” His eyes fell away from her and were dragged back again. “Why don’t you cover your arms?” he blurted.

“We wear what we please here.”

“Where is *here*?”

“Sort of another world.” He glanced back at the gateway. “It wouldn’t do any good,” she explained. “There isn’t anything in there now but blackness. The way out is a time, not a place. Don’t be afraid. You’ll go back when it’s time.”

“When?”

“How long did you have to sleep?”

“Forty-eight hours, though I’d never—”

“Maybe you can stay that long. Who’s to know?”

“You’re—sure I’ll get back in time?”

“Sure as sure. Is it all right now?”

Shyly, he smiled. “Fine. Everything’s fine.”

She took his hand, and skipped two paces, so he had to follow. He tried politely to tug his hand free, but she held fast and seemed not to notice. A giggle, a blush, the slightest sign of self-consciousness in her, and he would have found the contact unbearable.

But she was so completely at ease that the revulsion would not come, and she chattered so gaily, making him answer, keeping him busy, that, even had he felt like asking her to let go, he had no space for the words, nor the words with which to do it.

"You were in my cubicle," he said breathlessly, as she hurried him down the slope.

"Oh, yes—more than you know. I watch you sleep. You sleep nicely. There's a tanager." She stopped, balancing, something flowing out of her shining face to the blazing bird and back again. "I came to see you at your office, too. Everything's straight and hard there, and sort of lonely. But all you people are lonely."

"We're not!"

"You wait until the dream's finished and you won't say that. Want to see a magic?" She stooped, still walking, and brushed her long fingers across a thick growth of tiny spiked leaves. They all closed up like little green fists.

"Why'd you come?" he asked.

"Because you were ready to wonder."

"Wonder what?"

She appeared not to consider this worth answering, but released his hand and bounded like a deer once, twice, then high over a brook. He floundered through it, soaking his bedshoes.

When he caught up with her, she touched his chest.

"Shh!"

On the wind floated a note, then another note and, high and sweet, another, so that they became a chord. Then a note changed, and another, and another, and the chorus of voices modulated softly, like the aurora, which is the same as long as one looks, but changes if one looks away and back.

"What's your name?" he asked abruptly.

"What would you like it to be?"

"*Flower!*" he cried, the strange pressures of a dream asserting themselves; and with it he felt a liberation from the filth with which custom had clothed the word.

“And you’re Roan, and a roan is a horse with wind in his mane and thunder in his feet, sweet-nostriled, wild-eyed, all courage and speed.”

He thought it was a phrase from a song, yet it could have been speech—her speech. He squished the water in his muddy shoes and almost whinnied with delight at the thought of the thunder in his feet. She took his hand again and they leaped together to the brow of a foothill. Ahead, the song finished in a roar of good laughter.

“Who is it?” he wanted to know.

“You’ll see. There—*there!*”

Where the hill shouldered into the forest was a clear, deep pool. In the forest and on the hillside, buildings nestled. Their walls were logs and their roofs were thatch. They were low and wide, and very much part of the hill and the woods. In the clearing between woods and slope, by the pool, was a great trestle table and, around the table, were the people who had been singing—you could tell by the sound of their laughter.

“I can’t—I *can’t!*” Roan croaked miserably.

“Why, what’s the matter?” asked Flower.

“They have no decency!”

“There are only two thing which are indecent—fear and excess—and you’ll see neither here. Look again.”

“So many limbs,” he breathed. “And the colors—a green-and-red man, a blue woman ...”

“A blue dress and a harlequin suit. It’s grand to wear colors.”

“There are some things one shouldn’t even dream.”

“Oh no! There’s nothing you can’t dream. Come and see.”

They went to see. They were made very welcome.

VI

At dusk, on the second day, Flower and Roan walked a shadowed aisle in the forest. Roan’s sleeping garments were tattered and seam-gutted, for he would not give them up, though they had not been designed for the brutality they had suffered. Yet he did not mind the rips and gapes, for no one else did. His bedshoes were long gone and he felt that if he were told he would never again feel the coolth of moss under his bare feet, or the tumble of brook-sand, he would die. He knew the Earth as something more than a place on which to float sealed cities. He had worked till he

hurt, laughed till he cried, slept till he was healed. He had helped with a saw, with a stone, with a song. Wonder on wonder, and greatest wonder of all—the children.

He had never seen any before. He did not know where children came from except that, when they were twelve, they went to their families from the crèches. He did not know how they were born. He did know that each child was educated specifically for a place in his Family and in the Stasis, and that the largest part of this education was a scrubbing and soaking and rubbing in of the presence of the father—his voice, features, manners of living and speaking and working. When the child emerged, there was a place for him in the home, by then very little different from his last place in the crèche, and he was fitted to it, not by the accidental authority of parentage, but through the full-time labors of a bank of specialists.

Each family had one boy, one girl—one trade, one aim. This was how an economy could be balanced and kept balanced. This was how the community could raise its young and still maintain the family.

But here, in this dream ...

Children babbled and sang and burned their fingers. They ran howling underfoot and swam like seals in the pool. They fought and, later, loved. They grieved, sweated, made their music and their mistakes. It was all very chaotic and perplexing and made for a strong, sane settlement which knew how to laugh and how to profit from an argument. It was barbarous and very beautiful.

And it had a power—for these people quite casually did what Roan had seen Flower do. They seemed to have a built-in transplat and could send and receive from anywhere to anywhere. They could reach up into nothingness and take down bread or a hatchet or a book. They could stand silently for a time and then know what a wife would serve for nutrient—which they brazenly sat together to eat, though they went privately for other functions no more disgusting—or the tune of a new song or news of a find of berries.

They seemed willing enough to tell him how all this was done, yet his questions got him nowhere. It was as if he needed a new language or perhaps a new way of thinking before he could absorb the simple essence. But for all their power, they had calluses on their hands. They burned wood as fuel and ate the

yield of the land around them. To put it most simply, they made their bodies function at optimum because it made them joyful. They never let the *psi* factor turn, cancerlike, from a convenience to a luxury.

So Roan walked quietly in the dusk, Flower at his side, thinking about these things and trying to shake them down into a shape he could contain. "But, of course, this isn't real," he said suddenly.

"Just a dream," nodded Flower.

"I'll wake."

"Very soon." She laughed then and took his hands. Don't look so mournful. We're never very far away!"

He couldn't laugh with her. "I know, but I feel that this is—I can't say it, Flower. I don't know how!"

"Then don't try for now."

Before he knew it, his arms were around her. "Flower—please let me stay."

She stirred in his arms. "Don't make me sad," she whispered.

"Why can't I? Why?"

"Because it's your dream, not mine."

"I won't let you go! I'll hold onto you and I won't wake up!" He staggered then and fell heavily. Flower stood calmly ten feet away.

"Don't make me sad," she said again. "It hurts me to push you away like this."

He climbed slowly to his feet and held out his hand. "I won't spoil any more of it," he said huskily.

They walked silently in the dimness, toward the shaft of light which the sun lay up the valley to the settlement each evening at this season.

"How soon?" he asked, because he could not help himself.

"When it's time," she said. She released his hand, put her arm through his and took his hand again. They came to the light.

Roan looked slowly from one end of the clearing to the other, trying to see it as it had been to him at first, then as it was with the familiarity of two days. There was the kettle they used, they said, to make sugar from the maples, and he pretended he had seen it boil, seen the frantic dogs snapping the caramelized sweetmeat up from the snow and running in circles frantically until it melted and they could get their silly mouths open again.

There was the buckwheat field which would carpet the spring snow with quick emerald on a warm day. There was the pond, there the ducks with old-ivory webs and mother-of-pearl lost in their necks. He saw—

“There!” he yelled, and twisted away from Flower, to go racing across the clearing. “You!” he shouted. “You! *Stop!* You by the pool!”

But the man did not turn. He was tall, as tall as Roan; his hair was very long, his eyes were green and, at the side of his cleft chin, was a curl of a scar. In the water, there was a chuckle of laughter, a flash of white.

“You with the scar,” Roan gasped. “Your name—I’ve got to know your—”

As the man turned, Roan looked past his shoulder, down at the water, straight into the startled eyes of his sister Valerie.

And that was the end of the dream.

Only one good thing had happened since his mother had removed the block from his cubicle door. The cubicle itself had been the most depressing conceivable place to wake up in; its walls crushed him, its filtered air made him cough. It had no space, no windows. The dressing shield brought out a thudding in his temple and he hurled it to the floor, turning violently away from it, physically and mentally. He felt that if he itemized the symbolism of that tubular horror, he would go berserk and tear this coffin-culture apart corpse by corpse. Breakfast was an abhorrence. The clothes—well, he put them on, not daring to be angry about them, or he never would have gotten to the office.

Corsonmay looked his way only long enough to identify, then stuck her silly flaccid face in a file-drawer until he was safely in his office. He looked at the desk, its efficient equipment, at the vise-jaws called walls and the descending heel called a ceiling, and he shook with anger. But he was weak with it when the heavy voice issued from the grille: “Step in here, Roan Walsh.”

Trouble again. Out of the prison into the courtroom.

He took four great breaths, three for composure, one a sigh. He went to the panel and it admitted him. His father sat back, his head and beard vying texture against texture. Before him was a scattering of field reports, and he looked as if he had nibbled the corner off one of them and found it unexpectedly good.

“Good Stasis, Private.”

The old man nodded curtly. “Your absence made it necessary for me to take up the threads of your work as well as my own. You will find what I have done on reports subsequent to yours.” He stacked the cards neatly and scattered them. “On reviewing these, I found to my surprise—my pleasant surprise, I may add in all fairness—that you have done a phenomenal amount of work. Kimberly, Krasniak, that warehouse tangle in Polska. And in spite of its speed, the work is good. I investigated it in detail.”

This, thought Roan, sounded *really* bad. He put his hands behind him, lowered his chin in The Stance, and set his teeth.

“The investigation brings out,” lumbered the vocal juggernaut, “that the work was done in roughly speaking four hours, three and one-half minutes. Very good. It seems, further, that the elapsed time involved was five hours, forty-eight minutes and some odd seconds. Approximately, that is.” He tapped the edges of the cards on the desk, flickered the lightning at Roan, then snapped forward and roared, “One hour and forty-five minutes seem to have disappeared here!”

Roan wet his lips and croaked, “There was noonrest, Private.”

The Private leaned back and stretched jovially. “Splendid, my efficient young scoundrel. Superb! And what is the noonrest permitted us at our present altitude in the organization?”

“Forty minutes, Private.”

“Good. Now all we have to account for is one hour and five minutes. Sixty-five precious, irredeemable minutes, which the resources of Stasis itself could not buy back. Over an hour unreported, yet somehow a double-time dock from your wages is not entered here. Or perhaps it is entered and, in my haste, I overlooked it.”

“No, Private.”

“Then either one or more transactions of company affairs were handled on that afternoon and not reported—which is gross inefficiency—or the time was spent on idling and personal indulgence, with every intention of accepting payment from the firm for this time—which is stealing.”

Roan said nothing except to himself, and that was, almost detachedly, “I think I can stand about four minutes, thirty-two and three-tenths seconds—approximately—more of this.”

"The picture is hardly a pleasant one," said the Private conversationally, and smiled. "The records give me the choice of three courses of action. First, the time owed may be made up. Second, the value of these hours may be paid back. Third, I can turn you over to the Central Court with a full indictment, and thereby wash my hands of you. You might be given a bow and arrow and left to make your way in the wilderness between segments of Stasis. You could survive a long time with your training. Days. Weeks even."

"Eighteen, seventeen, sixteen ..." Roan counted silently.

"However, I am going to give you every opportunity to ameliorate this—this frightful crime. Take these cards into your office. You have between now and 1600—a punctual 1600, that is—in or out of the office, to revise any slight miscalculations you may have made and to refresh your memory in the event that you did useful work for the firm in any of these lost minutes. Every alteration you make, of course, will be checked to the tenth of a second. Until 1600—be serene."

Roan, quite numb, tottered forward, took the cards, muttered, "Byepry," and awkwardly backed out.

Why, he wondered, did he stand for it?

Because there was no place to go, of course.

There was ...

No, there wasn't. That had been a dream.

He sank into a black paralysis of rage.

VII

The phone roused him. He received, ready to tear the head off the caller, any caller. But it was Valerie.

She said, "It's nearly noonrest." She would not meet his eyes. "Could you—would you mind ...?"

"Same place, right away?"

"Oh, *thank* you, Roan!"

He growled affectionately and broke off.

She was not at the Grosvenor transplat when he got there, so he stalked straight to the park. She was waiting for him. He dropped down next to her and put his head in his hands—and damn the passers-by. Never seen a man's hands before?

He sat up after a while, however; Valerie's silence positively radiated. He wondered if he should tell her about the man in the

dream, and almost laughed. But he could not laugh at Valerie. Not now. In the dream, there had been love. Valerie, in her crushed, priggish way, had fallen in love. All right, tell her you still haven't found the guy and then sympathize with her and get it over with. You have some real worrying to do.

He turned to her. "I haven't been able to—"

"His name's Prester." She leaned close to the partition and whispered, "Oh, Roan, you saw me like that, in the pool. They hadn't meant for you to see me at all. Oh, what you must *think!*"

He said, just as softly, "I hadn't let myself believe it."

"I know," she said desperately. "I'm surprised you even came here."

"What do you mean—Oh, the pool! Do you know, it never occurred to me until this minute that you were—that you'd be—oh, forget it, Val. I'm just glad you found him. Prester, hm? Nice-looking fellow."

Her face lit up like a second sun. "Roan—*really?* I'm not a—hussy?"

"You're grand and the only person I know in this whole sterile, starched world who's managed to live a little! I'm *glad*, Val! You don't know—you can't—what I've been through. Enough to make a dozen dreams. And it came like a dream—I mean parts and chunks of real-life things—things Granny was maundering about, things I'd seen, a girl I met once wrong-dialing—an accident, you little prude! I believed it was just a dream—I had to, I guess. I had to believe Flower and she *told* me it was." Lord, he'd said the word right out loud in front of his sister!

But she was quite composed, cheeks excitement-red, not disgusted-red, eyes bright and distant. "She's lovely, Roan, just *beautiful*. She loves you. I *know*."

"Think she does?" He grinned till it hurt. "Oh, Val, Val—the maplesugar kettle."

"Mmm—the oat-field!"

"The big table and the singing!"

"Yes, and the children—all those children!"

"What happened?" he cried. "How could such a thing happen?"

She whispered fervently, "We could both be crazy. Or the whole world could be coming apart and we slipped in and out through a crack into—or maybe it really was a dream, but we had it together. But I don't care, it was beautiful and—and if you'd

said I was a—because of—you'd have *spoiled* it and killed me, too. Is it all right then, Roan, is it really all right? Really?"

"You're sort of beautiful yourself. For a sister, that is."

"Oooh!" she squeaked, blushing and enormously pleased. Then, happily, "I'm glad I'm not you."

"Uh—why?"

"How does it work, what makes it go, is it a dream, and, if not, what could it be? Be like me, Roan. It happened—for the rest of my life it has *happened!* But—I hope there'll be more."

"If I find out how it works, what makes it go and so on, there *will* be more. So you just be glad *I'm* like me in that respect."

"If you found it, you—wouldn't keep me out?"

"If I couldn't take you," he said warmly, "I wouldn't go. Now do you feel better?"

"I'm going to kiss you!"

He roared with laughter at the very idea in a place like this and, under the stares this attracted, she cried, "Be quiet—thunderfeet!" At the phrase from Flower's little song, his heart twisted.

She peeped at his face and said, "I'm sorry, Roan."

"Don't be," he said hoarsely. "For that second, she was right here." He put out his hands, made fists, stared at them, then got them out of sight again. Flower—well, he'd have plenty of time to find her after 1600. "Val ..."

"I didn't know anyone could be so happy!" she said. "What, Roan?"

"Nothing. Just that I really am late," he said, abruptly changing his mind. No need to air his troubles to her now—the news services would take care of that about 1612. Meanwhile, let her stay happy.

They walked back to the transplat.

"Roan, let's come here every day and talk about it. I don't know a thing you did and you don't know what I did. Like the time—"

"Sure I will, sure," he said. "Take something pretty big to stop me."

She stopped dead. "There's something the matter."

"Get on your 'plat. Everything's fine. Hurry now."

She dialed and stepped up and was gone. He stood looking at the empty air, where her anxious face had been, until another

passenger filled it. He hoped he hadn't worried her.

He walked slowly back to the bench and sat down, and that was where he had his big idea.

"Whoever is that?" The thin old voice was edgy.

"Me. Roan," he said from the court.

The top panel of a door slid back and the voice floated to him, gentle now, and firm. "You know you're welcome here, son, but you also know you're to call first. Just spin that dial and clear out of here for an hour. Then you can come and stay as long as you like."

"Petals to that. I haven't got an hour. Come on out here or I'm coming in."

"Don't you use that language on me, you leak-brained snipe, or I'll lift your hair with a blunt nailfile!"

The instant she began to shout, he began to roar, "Decent or not, just get on out here. *If you'd shut off your low-fidelity mouth for twelve lousy seconds, you'd stop wasting your own time!*"

They stopped yelling together and the silence was deafening. Suddenly, Granny laughed, "Boy, where'd you learn that type language?"

"For years, I've been hearing you talk, Great Mam," he said diffidently. "It only just now occurred to me that I never really listened. And about being decent—if you're comfortable, come as you are."

"Damfidon't!" She came out of the room and kicked the door closed with a flip of her heel. She wore an immense wrapper of an agonizing blue and seemed to be barefooted. Her hair, instead of lying sleekly away from the center part in two controlled wings, flew free like a May's. Roan had one frozen moment, and then she tossed the hair back on one side with an angry twitch of her head. "Well?" she blazed. There seemed to be nothing left of the gentle talc-on-ivory quality in her voice.

Slowly, he smiled. "Damfidon't like you better the way you are."

She sniffed, but she was pleased. "All you can do to keep your eyes from rolling out onto the carpet. Ah, well, you've found my secret. Reckon I'm old enough to have just one eccentricity?" she demanded challengingly.

"You've lived long enough to earn your privileges."

"Come on in here," she said, starting down the court. "Most folks don't or can't realize I've spent the least part of my life in that cone-in-cone getup. Everybody else around's practically born in it. I just don't *like* it. Chest-padding the men so they won't look different from women!" she snorted. "I wasn't brought up that way." She opened the manual door in the corner. "Here we are."

It was an odd-shaped room, an isosceles triangle. He had never seen it before. "What happened to your voice, Granny? You feeling all right?"

In the familiar wind-in-the-distance tones, she said, "You mean you miss this little gasp?" Then, stridently, "Something I picked up for company. Had to. Nobody'd take me seriously when I talked natural. They cast me as a frail little pillar of respectability and, by the Lord, I was stuck with it. It's hot in here."

He missed the hint, waited for her to sit down, and then joined her. "Know why I'm here?"

She regarded him closely. "Sleeping well?"

"That wasn't a dream."

"No? What then?"

"I came to find out what it was. Where it is."

She fluttered the lapel of the wrapper. "You got this part of my secret life out of me, but that don't guarantee you all of it. What makes you so sure it wasn't a dream?"

"You just don't go to bed healthy and sleep for two days! Besides, there's Valerie. I saw her there, right at the very last second."

She grunted. " 'Fraid of that. No one was sure." She laughed. "Must've been a picnic when you two got your heads together. You come here to kill me?"

"*What?*"

"Outraged brother and all that?"

"Valerie's happier than she's ever been in her life and so much in love, she can't see straight. I'm just as happy for her as she is for herself."

"*Well!*" she smiled. "This changes things. So you want to take your sister and go live out your lives in a dreamland."

"It's more than that," he said. "I need one of your telekinesis operators. I mean *now*."

"The best I can do for you is a little girl who can knock down a

balancing straight-edge at any distance under fifteen feet.”

He made no attempt to conceal his scorn.

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “How’d you mix me up in this, anyway?”

“We’re wasting time,” he said. “But if you must know, it was your hints to me last time I was here—the transplat obsolete, people appearing in any room anywhere, communication without phones. I’d already seen telekinesis twice, when you told me that. And since then ...” he shrugged. “You *had* to be in it. Maybe you’d like to tell me why *I’m* mixed up in it.”

“Hadn’t planned to for a while. Maybe we’ll step up the schedule. Now what’s the all-fired rush?”

“I have an appointment in—” he checked—“less than two hours that is going to put me under the ground unless I can get help.” He told her, rapidly, about the lost time and his father’s threat.

“You’re dead right,” she said after a moment. “He’s afraid of you. I don’t know why he should be *that* afraid. He’s just like his father, the potbellied old—” She stopped, shocked, as a large hand closed over her wrist.

“I can’t listen to that.”

“All right,” she said with surprising swiftness. “I’m sorry. Given one of my TKs, what would you do?”

He leaned forward, put his elbows on his knees, bringing his gloved hands into plain sight.

“Do? I’m going to take this wrinkle-free civilization and turn it out into the woods. I’m going to clutter up the Family Rooms with the family’s own children. I’m going to turn Stasis itself upside down and shake it till the blood runs into its head and it finds out how to sweat again.”

Granny’s eyes brightened. “Why?”

“I could tell you it was for the good of all the people—because you’re Great Mam and lived through it all and had a chance to think about things like that. But I’m not going to say anything like that to you. No—I’ll do it because I want to live that way myself, head of a family of hard-handed, barefoot, axe-swinging people who are glad to get up in the morning.

“I thought of finding the dream-people again. I even thought of going out into the wilderness between cities and living that way myself. But if I did, I’d always be afraid that some day a resources

survey crew might find me, scoop me up and bring me back. Stasis wouldn't let people live like that, so let's make Stasis live our way."

He took a deep breath. "Now Stasis is built around the transplat. There can't ever be a better machine. But if I go in there today and claim I've spent years secretly developing one—if I get one of your people to start transmitting things all over his office and claim I have a new machine to do it with—why, the Private's got to listen. I'll save my job and spot your people through and through the whole culture till it falls apart. And one day maybe I'll be the Private at Walsh & Co.—and, Stasis, look out!"

"You know," she said. "*I like you.*"

"Help me," he said bluntly. "I'll like you, too."

She rose and punched his arm with sharp knuckles. "I'll have to think. You know, if you can fast-talk your way out of this, you'll only stall things a little. The old—your father—wouldn't buy any parlor tricks. He'd want to see that machine."

"Then let's stall. Can you fix me up with a telekin—telekineticist? That what you call them?"

"TK," she said absently. "I've got something a heap better than any TK. How'd you like a stationless transplat—a matter transmitter that will lift anything from anywhere to anywhere without centrals or depots?"

"There's no such thing, Granny."

"Why do you say that?"

"All my life I've been a transplat man, that's why. There's a limiting factor on matter transmission. It must have a planetary field; it must have a directing central; it must have platforms built of untransmissible material and—"

"Don't tell *me* how a transplat works," she snapped. "Suppose a machine was designed on totally different principles. A force-pump instead of a suction pump. Or an Archimedes screw."

"There isn't any other principle! Don't you think I *know*?"

"I'll show you the damn machine!" She marched to the angled wall of the little room and bumped a scuff-plate near the floor. The entire wall slid upward into the ceiling, swift and silent. Lights blazed.

It was quite a laboratory. Much of its equipment he had

thought existed only in factories. Most was incomprehensible to him.

Granny walked briskly down an aisle and stopped at the far wall. Ranged against it was a glittering cluster of equipment beneath a desk-sized control panel. The desk surface seemed to be a vision screen, though it was hinged at the top. At the side, he saw what looked like manipulator controls of the kind used in radiation laboratories.

"There's a servo-robot this size on a hill about forty miles from here," said Granny.

She turned a switch, sat down over the screen and began to spin two control wheels.

"Tell you what it does," she said abstractedly as she worked, "though this ain't really the way it does it. Plot a straight line out from this machine and a line from the other. Where they intersect, that's your transmission point. Now draw two more lines from the equipment and where *they* cross, that's the arrival point. When they're set up, you haul on this snivvy and what was *here* is now *there*. The stuff doesn't travel any more than it does with a transplat. It ceases to exist at one point and conservation of matter makes it appear at another.

"But you've created just the strain in space which makes it show up."

"Show me."

"All right. Call it."

"My old wallet. Top drawer, left side in the office. Drawer's locked, by the way," he said.

"What's the matrix?"

He reeled off the address coordinates. She tapped them on a keyboard and bent over the screen. It showed a Stasis unit. She spun a wheel and the buildings rushed closer. Her hand dropped back to a vernier and the view slowed, seemed to press through the roof and hover over a desk.

"Right?"

"Go on," he said. "Pretty fair spy-ray you have there."

"You don't know!" She reached, and from a speaker came the quiet bustle of the office. She went back to the controls and the view sank into the desktop. Suddenly, the contents of the drawer were there. With the manipulators, she deftly hooked the wallet,

raised it a fraction. Then the scene disappeared as she shifted to another set of controls.

“Receiver location,” she murmured. The garbled picture cleared, became a mass of girders and then a bird’s-eye view of the room they stood in, so clear that Roan looked up with a start. He could see nothing. “Stick out your stupid hand,” said Granny.

He obeyed and she brought the scene down to it until its image hung in the center of the picture. Roan wiggled his fingers. Granny cut back to the other view, checked it, then threw over the “snivvy” she had shown him earlier.

The wallet dropped into his hand.

She switched off, turned and looked up at him. “Well?”

He said, “Why play around like this?”

“What do you mean?”

“This thing doesn’t do what you say it does. I got the wallet, sure, but not with that thing.”

“Do tell. All right, how *did* you get the wallet?”

He considered the instrument carefully. “It’s a sort of amplifier—yes, and range-finder, too. It just gets a fix for your TK man. Right?”

“You really think I’ve got a high-powered psychic hiding around here who does the work after I get to it with the finder?”

“*You’re* the TK!”

She slumped resignedly at the controls. “If you can’t lick ’em, join ’em. Old Roman saying. If that’s what you say it is, boy, then that’s what it is.”

“Why didn’t you say so in the first place?” he grumbled, looking at his watch. “So now what do we do?”

“Wait a minute—I’ve got to get used to something.” She hung over the console and then glanced up brightly. “I’ll break out the pilot model. You can’t tote this thing under your arm.”

She went to a storage wall and dragged out a bin. In it was a long box. Roan helped her open it and lift out the spindly collection of coils and bars, setting it on a bench.

“I’ll check you through this.” She flung off her wrapper and advanced on the machine. “Just turn it on its side for me,” she said. “what are you gawping at? Oh!” She looked down at her shorts and halter, and laughed. “I *told* you it was too hot in here.”

It was not that age had left no marks on her compact body, but

certainly not two centuries' worth. Holding a light-duty soldering iron near her cheek, she slapped herself on the bare midriff.

"One thing you might keep in mind about women as you get to know 'em, Roany—the parts that the decent people expose are exactly the ones that get old first. This face of mine was gone at 75, but the tummy's good for another hundred yet." She bent over the device. "Maybe it's better that way, maybe not—who's to say? Hand me the millivoltmeter there."

After a time, her work with the machine took precedence over everything else in Roan's cosmos. "You sure can get around in there," he said, awed, as he held the light for her.

"Think so?" she grunted, and went on working steadily.

VIII

At 1451, Roan Walsh arrived at the Walsh Building. His head spun with its lopsided weight of advice, technical data and strategy. His arrival was in the warehouse, not in the office, for he brought a long wooden box on casters. He pushed the box himself up the long corridor to the office wing.

"Oh, Roan Walsh, can I help?"

"No, Corsonmay. Wait—Yes, come in." He put his hands on the end of the box and nodded at the dithering secretary. "Grab hold here."

She came close, tittered and let the tips of her gloves show for an instant before she slipped them clumsily under the end of the box.

Not that end up, you addlehead.

Roan yelped and let go. Corsonmay, now bearing most of the not inconsiderable weight, began to mew rapidly. Roan, sitting flat on the floor, gasped, "Who said that?"

"Ewp!" squeaked Corsonmay. "It's heavy!"

"Let it down. My God, Corsonmay, you're as strong as a horse!"

"That's the nicest thing you ever said to me," she beamed without sarcasm.

He turned to her, found himself face to face with her withered ardency. "What did you say about lifting up the wrong end, Corsonmay?"

"I didn't say anything."

I did.

"Byemay," he said, and forestalling her, added, "Really—

nothing more. Byemay.”

She left and he whirled, hunting futilely in midair. “Granny! Where are you?”

Briefly, just at eye-level, the business end of a needle-focus audio beam projector appeared. Roan patted it happily and it disappeared. Bless her, she’d be watching everything through her big machine, her audio aimed for his inner ear every second.

At 1559.5, the ceiling said, “Roan Walsh, you may step in now.”

“Coming, Private.” He all but started at the sound of his own voice. How was it that, though he seemed increasingly able to cope with anyone or anything, his father’s voice still turned him to mush?

But that could wait. He stepped just inside the room.

“Come, come—stand close. I intend to do one of several things, but biting is not one of them.”

Roan stayed where he was. “May I have the Private’s permission to bring a piece of equipment in?”

“You have my permission to bring those cards in, revised or not. Nothing more.”

“The Private deprives me of the use of evidence he himself assigned me to bring,” Roan said stiffly.

“Do I now?” The beard, its lower end invisible under the privacy hood, was pulled thoughtfully. “Very well. But I should warn you—you have no leeway, young man. None!”

Roan wheeled the box through the doorway. He was shaking with apprehension, but Granny’s voice pleaded inaudibly, *Trust me*.

Even in front of his father, he nearly smiled. He locked the casters and, with a tremendous effort, heaved the box up on end. The right end, this time.

“What the devil’s *that*?” demanded the beard.

“My evidence, Private.” Outwardly calm, inwardly aquiver, he drew out the top section of the box with its two knobs and their two sets of horns. Each horn was hollow and had a light inside. Roan turned them on.

“I asked you a question,” rumbled the Private.

“Your patience,” Roan responded.

What patience? Granny’s chuckle did more good for Roan than a week’s delay.

“Ready now, Private. May I have the use of some small object—your stylus, perhaps, or a small book?”

“You have taken my money and you are taking my time. Is it now your intention to take my property?”

Whyncha spit in his eye?

Roan threw up a glance of such extreme annoyance that the inaudible voice apologized.

Sorry. It's just that I'm on your side, honey.

Honey! He had tasted his very first honey is his “dream.” That was a nice thing to call someone. He wondered if anyone had ever thought of it before. To the Private, he said, “If I use my own property, there could be some suspicion of previous preparation.”

“I suspect the previous preparation with which you are cluttering up my office already,” growled the old man. “Here’s the old paperweight. It dates from the time when buildings had sliding panels opening to the outside air. If anything happens to it—”

“It will do,” said Roan levelly, taking it without thanks. The Private’s eyebrow ridges moved briefly. “Would you kindly point out a spot on the floor?”

With an expression of saintly patience, the Private drew out his stylus and threw it. It fell near the far wall. Roan placed the paperweight near the point of the stylus, on the carpet.

“And one more indulgence. A point on your desk—somewhere with enough area to support that paperweight.”

“Damn it, no! Go get those cards and we’ll settle the matter in hand. I fail to see—”

Don't let him rant. Find your own spot and ask him if it suits him.

Like a man in a hailstorm, Roan advanced through the booming and shrieking syllables and pointed.

“Will this do?” he shouted, just loud enough to be heard over the storm.

The Private stopped just then and Roan’s voice was like an airfoil crashing the sound barrier. Both men recoiled violently; to his own astonishment, Roan found that he recovered first. The old man was still sunk deep in his chair, the base of the beard quivering. In Roan’s ear, Granny cackled.

Roan grasped the two horns protruding from one of the spheres on his machine and turned them so that the beam from each

rested on the center of the paperweight.

"The production model would have other means of aiming," he explained as he worked. "This is for demonstration only." The other two beams were aimed at the indicated spot on the desk. "Ready now, Private."

"For what?" snarled the Private, then grunted as if he had swallowed a triple ration of roughage, for when Roan touched the control, there was a soft click and the paperweight appeared on the desk, exactly in the small pool of light from the beams. He put out a hand, hesitated, dropped back in his chair. "Again."

Roan threw the lever the other way. The paperweight lay quietly on the carpet. "For years, I have used every available minute on the research needed for this device and in building it. If the Private feels that the machine is of no use to this firm and the industry, that the time spent on it was wasted or stolen, then I shall be satisfied with his previously suggested—"

"Now come off it, son," said the beard. He rose and approached Roan, but kept his eyes glued on the machine in fascination. "You know the old man was just trying to throw a scare into you."

Got 'im!

"Could a large model be built?"

"Larger than a transplat," Roan said.

"Have you built any larger than this?"

Tell him yes!

"Yes, Private."

Slowly, the Private's eyes left the machine and traveled to Roan's face. Roan would have liked to retreat, but his back was against the wooden case.

Watch out!

"You feel this could be better than the transplat?"

Yes. Tell 'im yes—even if it hurts, tell im!

Roan found he could not speak. He tremblingly nodded his head.

"Hmm." The Private walked around the machine and back, though there was nothing to be seen. "Tell me," he said gently, "is this machine built on the same principle as the transplat?"

Sweat broke out on Roan's brow. He wished he could wipe it off, but to raise his glove would have been a rudeness. He let it trickle.

"No," he whispered.

"You are telling me that this is a new kind of machine, better than the transplat!" When Roan neither moved nor spoke, the Private suddenly shouted, "Liar!"

Roan, white, dry-mouthed, with a great effort brought his eyes up to meet those of the livid Private. "A transplat can't do that," he said, nodding to the paperweight.

"You've got to be lying! If there was such a machine as this, you couldn't build it. You couldn't even conceive it! Where did you get it?"

Say you built it—quick!

"I built it," Roan breathed.

"I can't understand it," mumbled the Private.

Roan had never seen him so distressed and his curiosity got the better of his own tension. "What is it that you want me to say, Private?"

The Private swung around, face to face with his son. "You're holding something back. What is it?"

This is it! Now hold tight, honey. Tell him it works by PK.

Roan shook his head and set his lips, and the Private roared at him. "Are you refusing to answer me?"

Tell him, tell him about the PK. Tell him!

Roan had never felt so torn apart. There had to be more to this than he knew about. What was pushing him? What tied his tongue, knotted his stomach, swelled his throat?

Trust me, Roan. Trust me, no matter what.

It broke him. He choked out, "This is only a direction-finder. It works by psychokinetic energy."

"By what? What?" The Private fairly bounced with eagerness.

"It's called PK. Mental power."

"Then it really isn't a machine at all!"

"Well—yes, you might say so. That's my theory, anyway." And where were the tied tongue, the aching throat? Gone!

"And you believe in that psycho-stuff?"

Roan found himself smiling. "It works."

"Why were you hiding it?"

"Would you have believed in such a thing, Private?"

"I confess I wouldn't."

"Well, then—I wanted to get it finished and tested, that's all."

"Then what?"

Give it to him. I mean it—give it to him!

"Why, it's yours. Ours. The company's. What else?"

The dry sound was the slow rubbing of gloved hands together. The other, which only Roan heard, was Granny's acid chuckle. *And he didn't even ask where the psychic operator was—notice? And he never will.*

The Private said, "Would you like to work with the Development Department on the thing?"

Sure, honey. I'll never let you down.

"Fine," Roan said.

"You'll never know—you can't know what this really means," said the Private. For a moment, Roan was sure he was going to clap him on the shoulder or some such unthinkable thing. "I can own up to a mistake. You should've been on the nuts-and-bolts end right from the start. Instead, I had you chasing inventories and consignments. Well, you've shown up the old man. From now on, your time's your own. You just work on anything around here that amuses you."

"I couldn't do that!"

Yes, by God, you could! snapped the voice in his ear. And while he's soft, hit him again. Get your own home.

His own home! With one of those PK machines, he could go anywhere, anytime. He could take Val—and find Flower again!

IX

It was warm and windy and very dark. The village was asleep and only a handful of people sat around the great trestle table in the clearing. The stars watched them and the night-birds called.

"To get grim about it," said the old lady in a voice a good deal less than grim, "breaking up a culture isn't something you can do on an afternoon off. You've got to know where it's been and where it is, before you know where it's going. That takes a good deal of time. Then you have to decide how much it needs changing and, after that, whether or not you were right when you decided. Then, it's a good idea to know for sure—but for *sure*—that you don't push it so far, it flops over some other gruesome way."

"But I was right all the same, wasn't I?" Roan insisted.

"Bless you, yes. You don't know how right."

"Then tell me."

"Some of it'll hurt."

"Don't hurt him," said Flower, half-seriously. Roan took her hand in the dark, feeling, as always, the indescribable flood within him brought by the simple touch of living flesh.

"Have to, honey," said Granny. "Blisters'll hurt him too, and his joints will ache at plowin' time, but in the long run he'll be all the better for it. Who's there?" she called.

A voice from the darkness answered, deep and happy, "Me, Granny. Prester."

"Hi, Granny," said Val. They came into the dim, warm glow of the hurricane lamp guttering on the table. Val was wearing a very short sleeveless tunic, which looked as if a spider had spun it. She and Prester moved arm in arm like a single being. Looking at her face, Roan felt dazzled. He squeezed Flower's hand and found her smiling.

"Sit down, kids. I want you to hear this, too. Roan, would you do something for me—something hard?"

"What is it?"

"Promise to shut up until I've finished, no matter what?"

"That's not hard."

"No, huh? All right, Flower, tell us all just exactly what psi powers you have."

Roan closed his eyes in delight, picturing again Flower's appearance in his cubicle, her birdlike flitting about the gateway during his dream, the cup she had drawn out of thin air for him. She said, "None that I know of, Granny."

"*What!*" he exploded.

Granny snapped, "You have promised to shut up!" To Flower, she went on, "And who's got the most psi potential in the place, far as we know?"

"Annie," said Flower.

"The fifteen-year-old I told you about," Granny explained to Roan. "The one who can knock over a straight-edge. Shut up! Let me finish!"

With a great effort, he subsided.

"In a way, we've lied to you," said Granny, "and, in a way, we haven't. I once told you some of what I've been thinking of—the new race of people that has to be along some day, if we let it—

the next step up. I believe in them, Roan; call that a dream if you like. And when you had your dream those two days, we made the dream come true for a little while. We worked that thing out like a play—I had you in the frame of that new machine of mine all the time.

“It is a new machine, Roan, built on a new principle that the transplat boys never thought of. It’s just what I told you it was—a stationless matter transmitter—no central, no depots, no platforms. I used it on every psi incident you witnessed in those two days. Believe me?”

“No!”

“Val?”

“I’d like to,” she said diffidently. “But I’ve always thought—”

“There’s no use being tactful about this,” said Granny. “For the rest of your life, this is going to bother you, Roan, Val—and, later, a lot of other people we’ll bring in. You’ll rationalize it or you won’t, but you’ll never believe I have a new kind of machine. Shut *up*, Roan!

“You two and the rest of your generation are the first group to get really efficient crèche conditioning. You don’t remember it, but ever since you were suckling babes, you’ve been forced into one or two basic convictions. Maybe we’ll find a way to pry ’em loose from you. One of these convictions is that the transplat is the absolute peak of human technology—that there’s only one way to make ’em and that there are only certain things they can do.

“You got it more than Val did, Roan, because you males in the transplat families were the ones who might be expected to develop such a machine. That’s why, when this new one was built, *women* built it. Don’t fight so, son! We have it, whether you believe it or not. We always will have it from now on. I’m sorry—it hurts you even to hear about it and I know what you went through when you had to sell it to your father. You damn near choked to death!”

Roan breathed heavily, but did not speak. Flower put her arm across his shoulders.

“We had to do it to you, boy, we *had* to—you’ll see why,” said Granny, her old face pinched with worry and tenderness. “I’m coming to that part of it. Like I said, you don’t break up a culture

just all at once, boom. I wanted to change it, not wreck it. Stasis is the end product of a lot of history. Human beings had clobbered themselves up so much for so long, they developed what you might call a racial phobia against insecurity. When they finally got the chance—the transplat—they locked themselves up tight with it. That isn't what the transplat was for, originally. It was supposed to disperse humanity over the globe again, after centuries of huddling. *Hah!*

“About the time they started deep conditioning in the crèches, walling each defenseless generation off from new thoughts, new places, new ways of life, a few of us started to fear for humanity. Stasis was the first human culture to try to make new ideas impossible. I think it might have been humanity's first eternal culture. I really do. But I think it would also have been humanity's worst one.

“So along came Roan—the first of the deep-conditioned transplat executives, incapable of believing the service could be improved. There were—are—plenty more in other industries and we're going after 'em now, but transplat is the keystone. Roan, believe it or not, you were a menace. You had to be stopped. We couldn't have you heading the firm without introducing the new machine, yet if it weren't introduced in your generation, it never would be.

“Your father is the last weak link, the last with the kind of imperfect conditioning that would let him even consider an innovation—remember your suggestion for eliminating freight operators? Only he would be unconditioned just enough to put our new machine into Development before realizing that, once in use, every cubicle in the whole human structure will suddenly be open to the sky. And it's all right—he can be trusted with it, because his ‘decency’ won't let him abuse privacy. *We'll* take care of that side of it!”

“I wish you wouldn't talk like that about him,” said Roan miserably.

“I'm sorry, boy. Does it do any good to tell you that subservience and blind respect for your father are conditioned, too? I wish I could help you—you'll have that particular sore toe tramped on all your life. Anyway, enter Roan, just when we've perfected the new machine. There would have been no problem if we could have broken your conditioning against it, but the only

alternatives seemed to be—either you'd see the machine operate and think you had lost your sanity, or you'd use your position in the firm to eliminate all trace of it."

He objected, "But you were wrong both ways."

"That's because we discovered that the conditioning against any new transplat was against any new *machine*—any new *device*," Granny replied. "They'd never thought of matter transmission by a method *which was in no way a device*!"

"Can you see now why your father was so upset when he was faced with you and your pilot model? One of the props of his decent little universe was that the conditioning would stick—that of all people on Earth, you'd be the last to even think of a new machine, let alone build one. And when at last you came out with that gobbledegook about psychic power, he recognized the rationalization for what it was and felt safe again. Stasis was secure.

"I don't mind telling you that you made us jump the gun a bit. Our initial plan was to recruit carefully, just the way we did you. Dreams—unexpected and high-powered appeals to everything humanity has that Stasis is crushing. Then when there were enough of us wilderness people, maybe the gates would open. But ultimately we'd win—we have all nature and God Himself on our side.

"But you came along—what a candidate! You responded right down the line—so much that, if we'd given you your head, you'd have dynamited Stasis and probably yourself and us along with it! And you took to that psi idea the way you took to the steak we planted in your nutrient that day, testing for food preference before the dream sequence. All of a sudden, you wanted to plant our machine spang in the middle of Stasis! It was chancy, but—well, you've seen what happened."

"Can I talk now?" Roan asked uncomfortably.

"Sure, boy."

"I'm not going to argue with you about the new machine—how it works, I mean. All you've done is given Stasis a more efficient machine. You can interfere with the new network, but you could do that anyway with the one you already had. So what's the big advantage?"

Granny chuckled. From a side pocket, she dug a white object and tossed it across the table. It left a powdery spoor as it rolled.

“Know what that is?”

“Chalk?” asked Val.

“No, it isn’t,” Roan said. “It’s Lunar pumice. I’ve seen a lot of that stuff.”

“Well, you’ll have to take my word for it,” said Granny, “though I’ll demonstrate any time you say—but I got that at 1430 this very afternoon—off the Moon, using only the machine you saw in the lab.”

“Off the *Moon!*”

“Yup. That’s the advantage of the new machine. The transplat operates inside a spherical gravitic field, canceling matter at certain points and recreating it at others—a closed system. But the new machine operates on para-gravitic lines—straight lines of sub-spatial force which stretch from every mass in the Universe to every other. Mass canceled at one point on the line recurs at another point. Like the transplat, the new machine takes no time to cross any distance, because it doesn’t actually cover distance.

“The range seems to be infinite—there’s a limitation on range-finding, but it’s a matter only of the distance between the two parts of the machine. I got the Moon easily with a forty-mile baseline. Put me a robot on the Moon and I can reach Mars. Set up a baseline between here and Mars and I can spit on Alpha Centauri. In other words, an open system.”

They were silent as Roan raised his eyes and, for a dazzling moment, visualized the stars supporting a blazing network of lines stretching from each planet, each star, to all the others—a net that pulsed with the presence of a humanity unthinkably vast.

Prester murmured, “Anybody want to buy a good spaceship?”

“Why did you do it?” whispered Val, ever so softly, as if she were in a cathedral.

“You mean why couldn’t I mind my own business and let the world happily dry up and blow away?” Granny chuckled. “I guess because I’ve always been too busy to sit still. No, I take that back. Say I did it because of my conscience.”

“Conscience?”

“It was Granny who built the first transplat,” Flower explained.

“And *you* were telling her what could and couldn’t be done, Roan!” gasped Val.

“I still say—” he objected in irritation, and then he began to

laugh. "I once took a politeness-present to Granny. Knitting. Something for the old folk to do while they watch the sun sink."

They all laughed and Flower said, "Granny won't knit."

"Not for a while yet," Granny said, and grinned up at the sky.

To Here and the Easel

UP HERE IN THE SALT MINE I've got a log jam to break.

And that about expresses the whole thing. I mix pigments like I mix metaphors; so why not? Who's a writer?

Trouble is, maybe I'm not a painter. I was a painter, I will be a painter, but I'm not a painter just now. "Jam every other day," as Alice was told in Wonderland, as through a glass darkly; "Jam yesterday and jam tomorrow, but never jam today." I know what I'll do, I'll paint for calendars; isn't this the '54 boom for the 44 bust? I'll skip the art and do handsprings eternal on the human breast.

So quickly: grab the brush, sling the oils; *en garde!* Easel; you're nothing but a square white window to *me*; I'll throw a wad of paint through you so's we can take a good long look inside. I'll start just *here* with the magenta, or maybe over *here*, and—

And nothing.

So down I go on the chair, I look at the canvas, it looks back at me, and we're right where we started. Didn't start.

Up here in the salt mine, as I began to say, I've got a log jam to break. The salt mine is my studio, studio being a name for a furnished room with a palette in it. The log jam is in my head. Why is it I can't work just because my brains are tied in a knot? "Giles," the maestro, the old horse's tail of a maestro used to say to me, "Giles, don't paint with your brains. Paint with your glands," he used to say, "your blood. Sweat is a pigment. Dip your brush in—"

Shucks, Maestro! Get me a job in a sign shop. I'll sell everything else. Ad in the paper: for sale cheap, one set sable-tipped vesicles. One heart: ventricle, sinister; auricle, Delphic. Nine yards plumbing with hot and cold running commentaries, and a bucket of used carmine, suitable for a road-company Bizet-body.

Was a painter, will be a painter, ain't a painter. Make a song of that, Giles, and you can die crazy yelling it like Ravel chanting the Bolero. Ravel, unravel. Giles's last chants.

Ain't a painta, ain't a painta, ain't a painta *pow!* Ain't a painta, ain't a painta, ain't a painta *now!*

You better shut up, Giles, you're going to have another one of those dreams.

Well, I'll have it anyway, won't I?... the dreams, that's what's the matter with me. My glands I got, but my brains, they keep running off with me, glands and all. No not running off; more like a jail. I used to be a something, but I'm locked up in my own brains till I'm a nothing. All I have to do is figure a way out.

Or maybe somebody'll come and let me out. Boy, what I wouldn't do for somebody who'd come let me out. Anything. The way I see it, the other guy, the one in the dream, he's locked up too. I should figure a way out for him. So maybe he'll get on the ball and figure a way out for me. He was a knight in shining armor, he will be a knight in shining armor, but he ain't nothing but a nothing now. There shall be no knight. He got a prison turns night into eternal afternoon, with dancing girls yet.

I should get him out of a spot like that? What's the matter with a castle on a mountain with dancing girls?

On the other hand a knight who was a knight and who wants to be a knight is just a nothing, for all his dancing girls, if you lock him up in a magic castle on a magic mountain. I wonder if *his* brains are working str—

—aight because mine are sore churned. *Aiee!* And here the echoes roll about amongst the vaults and groinings of this enchanted place. No sword have I, no shield, no horse, nor amulet. He has at least the things he daubs with, 'prisoned with him. And yet if he would paint, and cannot, is he not disarmed? Ay, ay ... *aiee!* we twain are bound, and each of us is enchanted; bound together, too, in some strange way, and bound nowhere. And whose the hardest lot? He has a brush; I have no sword, and so it seems his prisoning is less. Yet I may call my jailer by a name, and see a face, and know the hands which hold the iron key. But he, the 'prisoned painter, languishes inside himself, his scalp his fetters and his skull his cell. And who's to name his turnkey?

Mine I can name; he comes now, soft leather awhisper on marble, his very stride abhorrent magic, the pressures of the unalive against the never-living. Atlantes, hated Atlantes, of the soft eyes and stone mouth, Atlantes who, controlling me, would

alter fate itself.

“Rogero, is all well with thee? Such a cry ... like a great wind tearing the rocks.” (His beard is full, he is too wise, he has no soul.)

“Ay, all is well!” I tell him scornfully. “Would I were such a wind, to tear and be torn on the rocks, and gladly, under the open sky; and never again to know a slow death of silks and sweets and boredom, the like of this ... give me my sword.”

“Ay, I will. And an enchanted shield to blind thine enemies, and a steed to master earth and air; this castle to shelter thee and all in it for thine own, and my powers for thy convenience—and all for a word.”

Atlantes is tall; yet, rising, I may make him lift his beard to face me. Going to him, thunder-furious, I may come close, yet unlike other men he will not flinch. I may not strike him, nor anyone here nor any thing, so cautiously is he bemagicked. “For a word!” My voice stirs the hangings and sets the great stone halls athrum. “You call my faith a word, my fealty, my every drop of blood and all my days. I will never be your knight, Atlantes.”

And of all things, I hate his smile. “Thee will, Rogero, unless thy choice is to languish here forever instead. My plans for thee are better ones than fate dictated,” he says, and laughs at me. His voice booms inside my skull as my voice boomed a moment ago within the castle. “This is thy destiny, knight: that a maiden shall free thee, and that through her thou shalt embrace a new faith of sobriety and humility, and spend thy days accursed with earthbound slowness like a tortoise, dressed like a wren-hen; swordless and somber and chained.”

I think about this, and look at the carvings, the silks, the aromatic mounds of fabulous fruits. At last, “Maiden?” I ask.

“Just the one for such adventures,” he says laughing again, for he has trapped me into responding. “and a just return for thy kind of stubbornness. She shall hold her faith a greater thing than thy flesh; she shall prefer to walk like a peasant rather than be borne like a gentlewoman; she shall scorn satin and lace and cover herself like a winterbound tree earth-hued and hard-barked. And worst of all, she shall have more brains than thee.”

“Surely you speak of some afterlife, some penance for a great sin!”

“Na, lad! Thine afterlife is in other hands than mine. ’Tis all thy

destiny, lad. Thou may'st not take whatever part of it that pleases thee, and cut the rest to fit thy fancy. The maid will not come here; but should she come here she shall not free thee; but should she free thee, thou wilt indeed finish thy life like a clip-winged hawk, hobbling about amongst the sweating serfs and calling them thine equals."

He reasons right; and fury from inside me pounds my hair-roots. And as the anger mounts, my mind's aswirl again; I seem to be here in this hall with the wizard, yet there, in the dream, in that dusty box of poverty and miracles inhabited by the painter who may not paint. I fight against it, even clinging to this hated hall, holding to the familiar enchantments like Atlantes' hippogriff and unbearable shield, his castle set in everlasting afternoon, and the silent and invisible chains by which he holds me; these, to me, are real, for all they are magic, and not beyond understanding like the painter's chamber with its window overlooking swift horseless chariots, its squat black demon-sculpture which first shrills, then speaks with the voices of people outside the room, its music box no bigger than my two fists, with the glowing golden eye and the sound, sometimes, of a hundred musicians; and all the marvels which are part of his poverty. Again I am he, myself, and he again one, the other, then both, then neither, and again my brains churn in transition. My mouth holds the aftertaste of grapes and mead, then the blue smoke he sucks constantly from his little glowing white sticks; I taste one, the other, both, neither.

I turn from Atlantes and his hated smile and throw myself across the yielding mound of silks and furs. And far away I hear the golden clarion of a bell, the great song of the castle's magic gate. I hear Atlantes' odd gasp, half surprise, half pleasure; I hear his soft feet on the hard marble. Who comes, who comes a-ringing, challenging, and unwanted—and unafraid of this castle and its many devils? If I am the knight, Rogero, I will watch from the window; if I am Giles, the painter, and I think I am, I will let the goddam doorbell ring. Whoever heard of a doorbell in a magic castle? *What* magic castle?

Here's a dirty bed, and there a dirty window, and over yonder the cleanest canvas yet; now wait, wait—Giles is my name, paint is my trade, if I was a knight, I'd have me a blade. *Give me my sword!*

What sword? Will you for God's sake get away from that doorbell so I can hear myself think? I almost had it then, that business about the knight, whoever he is—or is he *me*?—and his magic mountain, or is that really a furnished room? Ah, *shaddap* with that doorbell already!

“Whaddayewant?”

All it does, it rings.

“Who is it?”

Ring, ring.

All right, you asked for it, I'm going to snatch that door open, I'm going to haul off, no questions asked, and punch the nose that's ringing my doorbell. Twist the knob, snatch the door, knock the ringer, to the floor. *Blam*, a dead ringer.

So sometimes a tenth of a second is as long as a paragraph or your arm. The door is open and I'm standing still and tight like a kid looking through a knothole, being with and of the ball game but standing quiet, watching. I watch my hand fly through the door, making a fist on the way, I watch it reach her cheekbone and curl and compact there, pudgy and hard. Back she goes, not falling but standing straight, across the narrow lighted hall and against the wall, *wump-thump!* She is a little brown thing with hair unwonderful, beautiful lashes opening now to make her eyes round and glazed, and that's about all there is to her. “Mmmmm,” she says, and slowly slides down to the wall to sit, slowly bends her head to one side, the hair ahang like a broken wing. “Well I told you to get away, ringing that bell!” “Mmmm,” she breathes.

So I scoop her up, and up she comes, light as a leg o' lamb and common as cabbage, and I kick the door closed and I throw her on the dirty bed, akimbo-crumpled and immodest as a dropped doll, and who cares?—not the artist, who's seen better and wastes no time on the likes of this; not the man, for he is, as the saying goes, not quite himself just now. Here's a dry paint rag to be wet at the sink and wrung out, and pressed against the smooth beige-brown brow over the smooth lids with the tender row of feathers over the seal ... lashes, I will admit, lashes she has. She has damn-all else but my God! those lashes.

And the rag, coming away, leaves a stain on the brow, verdi-gris. One can pretend she is a brazen head, skinned with old silk, and the bronze staining through. But only until her eyes open;

then there is no pretense, but only a dowdy girl on my bed, a pallor 'pon my unpalatable pallet. She gazes past the green-brown stain and the anger of her brutalized cheek, and she has no fear, but a sadness. "Still nothing?" she murmurs, and I turn and look with her, and it's my empty canvas she is sad for and "Still nothing," half whispering about.

"I am going to punch your face again." It is a faithful promise.

"All right, if you will paint."

"I'll paint or not, whatever I feel like," I am saying in a way that makes my throat hurt. Such a noise it makes, a Day-Glo fluorescent dazzle of a noise. "Giles is my name and paint is my trade, and you keep your nose out of it. Your nose," I say, "looks like a piece of inner tube and you got no more side-silhouette than a Coca-Cola bottle. What you want to be ringing my doorbell for?"

"Can I sit up?"

By which I discover I am hanging over her close, popping and spitting as I bellow and peal. "Get up, get out!" I touch my neck and the scarlet welling of an artery there, I spin to the easel to strike it but cannot touch it, so go on to the wall and drive my fist against it. It is better than a cheekbone which hardly leaves a mark.

"Oh please, don't hurt yourself. Don't." she says, her voice high and soft-textured around the edges, like light through a hole in worn velvet, "don't!" all pitying, all caring, "don't be angry ..."

"Angry I am not," I say, and hit the wall again, "angry; I'm a devil and dangerous to boot, so don't boot me. You," I say, pointing at her, and there is blood on my hand, "are a draggletail; bad lines, wrong tone, foreground distracting—" (that would be my easel)—"background unappetizing." (That would be my bed). "The whole thing's not composed, it's—it's—decomposed. Where'd you get that awful dress?"

She plucks at it, looks at her hand plucking, makes a faint brief frown, trying to remember, and she is not afraid, she is only trying to answer my question.

"Well don't bother; I don't care where you got the dress. What do you want?"

Up come the lashes. "I want you to paint again."

"Why?"

"Don't, don't," she whispers. "You'll hurt your throat. I know

everything you've painted. You're getting good; you're getting great. But you don't paint any more."

"I asked you why; you didn't say why, you just said what happened." She looks at me, still not afraid, still puzzled. This girl, I think, is not only homely, she is stupid. "I asked you why—why? What do *you* care?"

"But I told you!" she cries. "You were going to be great, and you stopped. Isn't that enough?"

"No, not for people. People don't want things like that, greatness, goodness." I begin to be more angry at people than angry at myself. Much better, Giles—*much* better. "People want their work done easily. People want kisses and to feel important. People want to be amused and to be excited safely. People want money. Do you want money? Here's a quarter. Here's forty cents, even. Get out of here, people."

"I don't want money. I just want you to paint again."

"Why?"

Down go the lashes, away goes the voice like a distant wind. "I saw them clustered around your Spanish picture, *Candlelight Malaga*—two young people, holding hands very hard, very quiet; and an old man, smiling; and there was a little boy tugging at a woman's sleeve: 'Ma? Ma?' and when she said, 'Yes, dear,' she kept her eyes on the picture so he cried. I saw a man come away from Garret's, where your *Smoke* was hanging, and he laughed and said to all the strangers, 'All I have to do is *tell* her: she'll love me, it's right there in the picture.'" She spreads her square unwomanly hands to say, "That's what I mean, it's proved."

I don't care about the people, the crying child, the man who speaks to strangers, and all the rest of them. I never painted for them, I painted for—for—but it wasn't for them. So they're all intruders, and for them I've done enough, too much already. If what they have taken was really in the pictures, they have robbed me. If what they took was not there, they are fools. Must I paint for thieves and fools?

All this comes to me clearly, but there is no way to say it to the girl. "It's for those things," she says, as if my silence means I am agreeing with her. "So paint again."

"Paint, how can I paint?"

"Why not? What's the matter?"

"It's in my head." I hold it, hard. My elbows knock together; I

peek at her, peek at her through the wedge. "I'll tell you," I say painfully, "because you don't make any difference." (And oh, no, she wouldn't wince.) "When I painted, I was Giles, Giles yesterday and Giles today, so that where I stopped I could start, and even find the stopping place by tomorrow. And tomorrow I'd be Giles, and knew it so well I never thought about it. Now ... now I'm Giles. Before that I was—somebody else, and before that I was Giles again. And being Giles now doesn't matter, because soon I'll be someone else again, and after that, Giles. You don't understand that."

"No," she says. "Neither do you."

"Right, so right; the first right thing you've said, no compliments intended, whatever's-your-name."

"Brandt."

"Brandt. *Miss Brandt*, surely, there being limits beyond which the most foolish men will not go. Painting, *Miss Brandt*, is a thing having a beginning, a middle, and an end; and the beginning is part of the end of the painting before, and the end is part of the beginning of the next picture. I am Giles, and being Giles I suppose I could paint; but before—an hour or a while ago—say when you were ringing my doorbell, you and your fat nerve—I was somebody else. And soon my brains will scramble and words will mean two things or three, and yonder is either a naked canvas or a far granite wall, and under me a dirty bed or a mound of silks and furs, and what I want will be to paint or to regain my sword; I will be Rogero and Giles, one, the other, both neither; until suddenly Giles is gone, the easel, the painting—no, not gone, but like a dream, not really remembered because not really real."

"Let Rogero paint," says the fool girl as if she believes me.

There's a noise like one-third of a scream, one-half of a howl, and it's mine. "Rogero paint? He can't paint! He couldn't believe in it, couldn't think of it, wouldn't know a tint from a T square. Listen, you; listen to me: can you imagine me as a knight, imprisoned on a magic mountain, surrounded by spells I not only believe in—I *must* because they're real—jailed by a magician who rides a hippogriff? A hippogriff, *Miss Unimportant Q. Brandt*, you hear? A shining hippogriff whose dam was a brood mare and whose sire was a gryphon—a gryphon whose mother was a lion and whose father was an eagle. This hippogriff is real, real as the

spells, real as the magic mountain, real as the knight that you, Miss Interfering W. Brandt, can't imagine me being." (Have I been climbing, running? I am out of breath.) "To that knight," I say when I can, "my telephone and my radio are laughable wonders without foundation in fact, my inability to paint is of no importance except to give me his sympathy; he too is captured and fettered. He can do as little with my brushes as I might do with his sword. And you, Miss Unbeautiful Brandt, could only be the most piddling of small nastinesses intruding into his unbelievable fantasy. Now you know; now I've told you. There's nothing you can do, nothing you can believe, and your coming here or not coming means nothing. If you came to help, you've failed. If you came to fight something, you're beaten."

There is a time for wondering, wondering what someone will say, and this is it, and it is good. Good as anything could be now, where *that* is real or *this* is real, never both. For I lie under a weight and I cannot move it, and when it disappears I am no longer myself, and it is good to defeat someone, something, even an unimportant, unlovely girl; even when in the defeat there can be no victory for me, nor a lessening of the weight. So I wait, wondering in which of several possible ways she will acknowledge her defeat; and here it comes from the usual lips and the eyes behind the unusual lashes; here:

"May I use your phone?"

Because I said she doesn't matter, I may not let this matter either; I step away from the phone and turn my back, and soft footsteps pass me and soft fingers take up the hard phone; there's a chorus of clicks, composed in syncopes, seven measures long. And a ring, and a ring.

What portals open to this lady's ringing, this Brandt for the burning? What dilates to this dialing, this braw, bricht, moonlicht nictitation? My God, my God, here it comes again, the words like lyings in their layers, and I am he, and he is—either or, both, neither. Of these, "or" is king; I wear a coat d'or, that dry, exclusive little word. For we are desiccated to the preposition that all men are created sequels. The "or" is golden but my heart has been read, my mind has been lead; read, lead; just the color of Floradora orange-youth.

"Hello," says the telephone tinily because it can speak two syllables without moving its open mouth; "Giles," says Miss

Brandt, "just Giles," and the telephone laughs and says, "Okay."

Soft footsteps on the wooden, or is it marble floor, and the ring has been answered with a shout of laughter; and soft-footed, swift, Atlantes strides to the casement and the curtains of cloud leave the court, the mist melts away from the meadow below, the great golden gate is agleam in the sun, and gone is the gloaming. "Rogerero!" he cries (but am I not Giles, imprisoned in a dream, who says he is where a felon needs a friend? *Aieee!* Sharper than a serpent's truth is an ungrateful Giles!) "Rogerero, come and see thy destiny!" and in Atlantes' laugh lies such a triumph, such a scorn, I can only come and see. I go to stand beside him.

To either hand are buttresses of weather-hammered stele; before me the castellated wall like a cliff, like a sea becalmed and stood on edge, falls to the courtyard. Away and down and away rolls the magic meadow to its lower margin, mighty walls patrolled by poisoned gnomes. And when I see the gate I am myself again; Rogerero, 'prisoned knight, hungering for that craggy path beyond the gate.

"Thy destiny, knight—you see it?"

I look again; and there like a mole under a monument is a small brown person, dun and dowdy. In one hand is a crooked staff changed from its soil-sprung origins, and it is this which now again strikes the golden bell and sends its clang and hum to shake the shining air. "My destiny?"

He laughs again; there is battle in such laughter. "Look again!" With thumb and finger he makes a circle, and thrusts the hand before my face, and through that circle I see the gate—but not from the mountaintop, but as if I stood but twenty paces away. And though his magic is despicable to me, I yet must look.

Silently, for a long time I gaze. At last I say, "Of all you have told me of my destiny, magician, I see but one thing to bear you out, and that is, that yonder mudball is a maiden, for it is unthinkable that such a one could be anything else. As to the rest, it is not possible that fate should have stored for me anything so ... unadorned."

"Ah, then thee need only swear fealty to me, and we will squash this beetle together." The bell rings again. "If not, I must do it myself, and keep thee bound as thou art. But one or the other must be done, for that rude clanging is indeed the voice of thy fate, and that barefoot damsel has come as fate dictates, to

challenge me and set thee free.”

“She challenges *you!*”

“Ay, lad, with nothing but that crooked staff and the homespun cassock beneath which she generously hides her uninteresting limbs. Oh, and a piddling faith in some unimportant system of gods.”

“The staff is enchanted, then.”

“No.”

“She’s mad!”

“She is.” He laughs. “So tell me, good fool: wouldst go to her and spend thy days with her, swordless, horseless, tending the plaguey brats of peasants and slaves? Or wouldst thou ride with me and turn her into a damp spot on the meadow, and after, own the earth?”

“I’ll choose, wizard, but a choice of mine own devising. I’ll not go to her nor ride with you. I shall stay here and watch thy bravery and thine historic victory over that little brown she-monk, with her dried tree-branch arrayed against nothing but thy magic steed, thy mighty armaments, and thine army of gnomes. And when she is vanquished—”

“Thee would see her vanquished?” he mocks. “Thy last chance to be free? Thy destiny contains no other savior.”

“When she is vanquished, come back to me that I may spit in thy face and tell thee that of my three possible hells, I choose the one which can give thee no pleasure.”

He shrugs and turns away from me. At the door he gives me his evil smile. “I knew that one day thee’d call me ‘thou,’ Rogero.”

I snatch up a heavy censer and hurl it. With a crash it stops in mid-air before him and, broken, falls at his feet. His smile is a laugh now. “Be certain, wizard, that I use not the ‘thou’ of an intimate, but that of an animal,” I roar, and he laughs again; and surely one day, when I find a way, I shall kill this clever creature. I go to the casement.

Far below, I can still see the gate and the shining wall. The gnomes file away and down out of sight; and there, one fragile hand on the golden bars, the other holding the staff, the girl clings peering. Her courage is too foolhardy to be admired and her strength too small to be considered at all; surely Atlantes need only laugh once (that thunder of evil) or raise his brows, to shrivel up this audacious sparrow.

There on the brow of the flying buttress stands Atlantes, the wind whipping his figured mantle, the sun all startled by his jewels.

He raises a hand and turns it, and the gate, so far below, so far away, stands open. Nothing as massive as those golden bars should move so swiftly and noiselessly; the tiny figure at the entrance nearly falls. The girl stands in emptiness, the gate looming about her, the rocky hill behind her, and high and massive over her, Atlantes' castle crowned by the glittering magician himself. She is very small and very alone as she begins to mount the slope.

Atlantes, laughing, claps his hands twice—

And from a copse in the meadow comes a thunder of wings, and a glory. There with an eagle's cruel head and the foreclaws of the mightiest of lions; with the splendid haunches of a stallion and golden hooves—there rises, there floats, there hurtles the hippogriff. His cry ripples the grass; it is a clarion, a roar, and a scream, and through it and through it is a thing which makes my heart melt as never a woman could do, and mine eyes are scalded with pity and fellowship. For he, even he, the hippogriff is enthralled; and with all his soul he hates his master!

I am glad there is no one by, for I weep like a child. I am a knight, and I know my merits; yet everything splendid is behind me. My shackles may not be broken, and my very destiny is without beauty. Yet here before me is beauty crystallized, shaking the world with its piteous, powerful protest ... crystallized? Nay, alive, alive as a man could never be. See the sun on his golden plumes, oh see his purple flanks ... he is more than I can bear to look on, to think on ... I shall have him, mount him!

But if he sees me, knows my heart, I know not, for he sweeps past and hovers, and the top of the buttress takes him like a cupped palm. From the parapet Atlantes takes a curious shield, with its cover of soft bat skins cleverly pieced. He buckles it to the hippogriff's harness, then with a hand on the parapet and a hand on the shield, he climbs to the great beast's back; and oh! I am proud that the steed kneels not for him.

Atlantes leans forward and speaks, and what his word is I may not hear, but the animal's sweet, strong pinions spread and flick the stone but once, and skyward they ride.

In a great circle the hippogriff wheels, with Atlantes leaning

from the saddle. His piercing eyes, and all his magic to aid him, must discover any invisible armament she might have; and she must have none, for I hear his distant laughter as he leans over his steed's neck to speak another secret command. The wings go up together and hold like a great wedge, and down they drop just to the height of her head, and with a single thrust and the sound of soft thunder, their speed is checked and they are meadow-borne. Fifty paces away, the girl drops her staff and waits, weaponless.

Tiny and evil, Atlantes' mirth comes to me on the wind. He swings down from the beast's broad back, unbuckles his shield, and with a deft twist casts off its cover.

Now, he stands between me and the girl so that the shield faces away from me. Were it any other way, I should have seen nothing; this I knew when I saw the blaze of light which fanned out and down; when I saw birds swing and flutter and fall, and a stag turn away and blunder into a tree trunk. I had heard of this shield, but until now I had not seen it. In unspeakable ways, its gilded surface had been polished until it struck blind any who saw it. This, then, and the hippogriff, are what Atlantes brings to bear against one girl's fragile madness. Ah, a mighty magician he, and confident.

Beaten and dazzled, she stands frozen, waiting for—no, not mercy; she cannot expect that. Waiting then, for him.

The work of the shield is done. He covers it and confidently he strides down the slope to her. If he speaks, I cannot hear; I doubt he does, for he knows I am watching, and he will want me to understand. He stoops to pick up the useless staff she has dropped, and thrusts it into her hand; he takes her by the shoulders and turns her about to face the gate; he steps back, then throws up his shaggy head and bellows with laughter. Such dismissal of the blind thing might have been predicted; instant death would have been, for him, too gentle a thing. And so he stands, laughing, impregnable even to such strength as mine, with the invisible wall his spells have built about him; cruel and victorious—ah, a mighty magician indeed!

So, defeated, she moves toward the door ... door? the gate of gold ... but no, it is no longer a meadow, but a room where I keep my easel and my ... and now I see them both, the room and the meadow, as if one were painted upon glass and through it I

saw the other; and which? which the painting? *Aiee!* my brains are mixed and muddled again, I am one, the other, both, neither. I see a curtain of sky with mountains for its ragged hem ... a dirty wall, with one small bright spatter of my blood where I struck it, and the dazed dun maiden raising her staff, which is a small blue book with gold letters on it. "But you're blind!"

Miss Brandt has a twisted smile. Her teeth are no better and no worse than the rest of her, and not to be compared with her lashes. "I've been told that before, but I don't think I am. This is for you—here!" and she gives me the book.

Before or behind my eyes there's a flash, too bright; I think it's a hippogriff. Up here in the salt mines I stand and shiver until the crazy thing passes; I open my eyes slowly and secretively so that I can snatch a reality and make it real. And Miss Brandt is here (or still here, I forget which) and the meadow and the hippogriff become a memory again (or maybe a dream).

"Are you all right?" Her voice and her hand touch me together.

"Stay away from me! I'm crazy, don't you know that?" (Her lashes are up.) "You better get out of here. I'm liable to do practically anything. Look, you're already getting a black eye." I'm yelling again. "Aren't you afraid? Damn you, be afraid!"

"No."

It's a very puzzling thing, the way she should be dressed like a monk, and be holding a crooked stick; but that was a small blue book—that's right. I'm shaking my head, or is it a shudder; the girl and the wall and the door blur by me and my teeth are side-sliding, making a switch-frog sound. It can be halted by holding the heels of the hands on the halves of the head very hard ... and slowly saliva is swallowed ... libation, libration, liberation, and quiet at last. In that moment of stillness, when at last I am *here* altogether, I know that my ... dream, the Rogero thing, whatever it is ... takes no time at all. For she was at the phone when it began, that last time, and all those things happened to Rogero while she hung up and took two steps behind me ... yes, and I heard the steps. So when I become Rogero again, no matter what happens here, how many hours it takes, I shall see Atlantes and the vanquished maid, down and away below, and she fumbling the dry rough stick, blind, defeated destiny of mine.

So open your eyes to here and the easel and Miss Brandt who is not afraid. Hold out the hand with the book. "What's this?"

“Money.”

It’s a checkbook, sky-green and very disciplined and trackless inside, and sturdy and blue outside. “Blank checks.”

“*Cartes blanches*,” she smiles; and this is no place for smiling. So just wait, and the smile will go away. Ah. Unsmiling, she says, “It’s money; all you want. Just fill in a check and sign it.”

“You’re crazy.” But she shakes her head gravely.

So: “Why bring me money?”

“You can do whatever you want now.”

“I can’t paint. Do you think you can make me paint by giving me money?”

When her tongue touches her lips, they are the same color. No one, no woman, should be like that. Such a mouth could taste nothing, take nothing. It says, “Not if you don’t want to. But you can do all the other things you want to do—all you have ever wanted to do.”

What else have I ever wanted to do but paint? There must be something. Oh, there is, there is; I never had a chance to—to—and then my hand is crushing the book, the book of excellent quality which yields only slightly and, when my hand opens, is bland again. “It’s just paper.”

“It’s money. Don’t you believe me? Come with me. Come to the bank. Write out a check and see.”

“Money. How much money?”

Again: “All you want.” She is so very certain.

“What for?”

“Whatever you like. Anything.”

“I didn’t mean that.” Things are becoming real as real now. “When you take money or you give something; you always give something, a painting or a promise or—”

Her head turns briefly, a little, right, left, right, her eyes steady on me, so sliding between the lashes. “Not this money.”

“Why are you giving me money?” (You know, Giles, you’re frightened?) “What can I do for money mostly is pant. But not now. Not now.”

“You don’t have to paint. Not unless you want to, and then not for me. Giles, maybe you can’t paint because you want to do other things. Well, *do* them. Do them all; finish them until they’re all done and there’s only one thing left. Maybe then you can work again.”

"Then the money's for painting!"

Oh, she is so patient; oh, how I hate anyone as patient as that. "No. It's just for you. Do whatever you want. I don't want the money and I don't ever want it back. It isn't mine to begin with, so why should I care about it?"

"But you'd care if I didn't paint again."

The fringes fall, the lashes hide the ordinary eyes. "I care about that now. I'll always care." And now she has the door open. "Come to the bank. Come get your money. Then you'll believe me."

"The bank, yes, and then what? Go with you, I suppose, and you'll tell me what to buy and where to go and how to—"

"It's yours to do as you please. Now will you come? I'll leave you at the bank if you like."

"I like."

But no, this doesn't hurt her, and no, she is not angry; there's only one thing that touches her, and that one thing reaches through the closed door as we walk in the corridor, stretches down the stairs and past the lintels and the newels and the curbs and cabs and garbage all the way down to the bank; and that one thing is my white, clean, blind square eye of canvas.

I wonder if she knows; I wonder. Wondering under the polyglot columns corraling the bank (Doric they are, with Corinthian capitals, yes but the door is not Doric but arched and Byzantine, closed with a fanlight. I'd say from Virginia). "I wonder if you know."

"If I know what?" she says, still patient.

"Why I can't paint."

"Oh yes," she says, "I know."

"Well I don't, Miss Brandt. I really don't."

"It's because you don't know why you *can* paint," she says, and her eyes are no longer patient, but waiting. It is very different.

And when I shake my head (because that is no answer) her eyes are patient again. "Come," she says; and in we go from the portico, and wouldn't you know the ceiling is red with ropes of gilded plaster draped in altogether Moorish squares.

And here in a low wall made of glazed marble, and flat-topped with marbleized glass, is a little black gate that swings both ways. On the other side is a polished desk and a polished pate bearing polished glasses. "Mr. Saffron," says Miss Brandt; "Mr. Saffron"

says the chock-shaped sign on his desk, gold on black.

Mr. Saffron's glittering glasses tilt up; then straight and slowly he rises, like the Lady of the Lake. When he stands, his glasses lose some high lights, and I can see his eyes. They are blue and shiny—not polished, but wet; turned to Miss Brandt they are so round they go pale; turned to me they are slits gone all dark, with a little eave of pink flesh all the way across over both of them. And here is a man who is astonished by Miss Brandt and repelled by me; what a wonderful way he has of showing it, over and over again; round-pale, slit-dark, the whole time.

"This is Giles."

Mr. Saffron gives his slits to my brush-wipe khaki pants, and to my yellow shirt with russet cuffs which is really the top of my ski-pajamas, and to my face. "You're quite sure, Miss Brandt?"

"Of course!"

"If you say so," says Mr. Saffron, and sits. "We're quite ready. Will you sign this, Mr. Ahhh?" I hear a drawer move but I am sure he pulls the white card from his spotless stomach. With the shiny pen from his desk-set I write *Giles*.

"First name?" says Mr. Saffron to the card, another shiny pen in hand.

"Yes."

"Last name?"

"Yes," I say again; and up come the glasses. "That's his name, just Giles," Miss Brandt says quickly. And then she recites my address. Mr. Saffron writes it, putting no more of his boiled-veal fingers on the card than he has to.

Miss Brandt says, "You want to cash a check now?"

"Oh sure." I fumbled around and get the book. Miss Brandt comes close with a finger. "You write the date there, and the—" But I just sit there looking up at her until she goes away. What's the matter, does she think I don't know how to write a check? I write the check.

Mr. Saffron takes the check by its two ends and it flips softly like a little trampoline. He turns it over with a brittle snap and does a squiggle with his pen. "Sixty-eight dollars. All right, the cashier will give you your money." From his drawer he takes a yellow, ruled pad and curls down over it as if there were sudden fire in his watch pocket. Out we go through the little black gate, and when I look back he is not busy with his paper at all, but

staring after us the round-pale way.

“Is that all you want—sixty-eight dollars?”

I look at her. “What would I do with more than sixty-eight dollars?”

Patient, patient she says, “Anything, Giles. *Anything.*”

So we go to a cage and a fierce face says in a sweet voice, “How do you want it?”

“Cash.”

“Any way at all,” says Miss Brandt.

So he gives me the money and we go to a marble table in the middle of the bank while I look at it. Miss Brandt says, “Is that right?”

“What?”

“Is it all there? Weren’t you counting it?”

“Oh no. I was just looking at it. It really is real money.”

“I told you.”

“Is there more?”

Again she says, “All you want.”

“Okay, good. Well, Miss Brandt, you can stay here or go do whatever you want.”

“All right.”

I walk away and when I get to the big door with the fanlight I look back. Miss Brandt is standing there by the table, not exactly looking my way. I come walking back. I have a feeling inside that makes the base of my nose hurt. I stop by her and look at her while I wet my lips. She has a real sunset of a shiner by now but the lashes are all right. So I tell her, “You just don’t care what happens to me now.”

“You know I do.”

“Well, why didn’t you try to stop me if you cared so much?”

She says, “You’re not going to do anything important just now.”

“With all this money? How do you know?”

She doesn’t say.

“I guess you want me to come running back to you so you can take care of me.”

“No, Giles, truly,” she says in that absolutely certain way. “You don’t understand. I’m not important. I’m not trying to be important. I just don’t matter in any of this.”

“Not to me.” Why does she make me so mad anyway? “So what

is important?"

"Why you could paint. Why you can't paint. That's all."

"Well, the hell with that for now. Well—maybe I'll see you around."

She sort of shrugs. I just go. Maybe I want to turn around but I don't. There's something in my head about how do I get in touch with her if I should want to, but the hell with that too.

By all the paint pots of perdition, nobody's ever going to make Giles admit he's a part of the works, like she does. People like her, all they do is go around believing in something and trying to trap other people into believing it too. "I just don't matter in any of this." What kind of a way to get along is that, the silly bitch?

I get out of line of the bank door and then go across the street and stand in a low areaway where I can watch her when she comes out. From now on by God my business is *my* business. Who does she think she's brushing off?

It's getting chilly out, but who cares? I've got lots of time. Lots of money. Lots of patience. Miss Brandt, now, she's *really* got patience. On the other hand, all God's chillun got patience. Will you look at that bank, now; those big fat pillars are doing just what? Holding up a pseudo-Parthenonic frieze, that's what. That's really patience. Year in, year out they stand there holding it up and nobody knows it's there but the starlings. Patience—look at the work that went into carving all those figures, that fat, baggy nude in the middle clear down to the chow dogs or lions or whatever they are at the ends. *Stacciato*, they call that work, the lowest form of relief, and that fat one in the center, she sure would be. So they in turn are patient, the hodgepodge of Hermes and Demeters and blind Justices, holding still for the starlings. And when it's cold the starlings freeze on the marble stool, and when it's warm they stool on the marble frieze, and the meek shall inhibit the earth.

Oh holy Pete what's happening to my head ... listen, Giles, hold on to this area rail and keep your wall eyes on that bank and don't go off into no magic mountains. Watch that clock over the door. Watch it? I can *hear* it! Well listen to it then and keep your head in the here and now and don't let yourself go splitting the definitive. That, now, is a sick clock, it must be three hours slow, and listen to it moan. Oh I know a bank where the wild time groans ... Hang on, Giles boy; think of something else, like San

Francisco where the second-story men from across the Bay are called berkellers, and the Golden G—no! Think of the statue down the block, the Mayor's father on a horse, that's in the papers every other day should they move it or not ... My father's horse has many mentions ... and in the bank, now, Miss Brandt is leaving, see the gate is open and agleam in the sun as she stumbles on stones; it is as if Atlantes' mirth alone were bending her down to be crushed like a tree in a thunder-wind. And across the street—but meadow, meadow's the word—the blue-black helmets of the beastly gnomes show as they watch this ... could it be called a challenge? Ay; but a battle, no; only a defeat.

All this in a flash of stern anger, and then—yea, she is sinking, twisting about as if to fall at his feet ... then up she comes in a whirl, her crude staff invisible, lost in speed, and with a whip's crack, the staff ... *Aiee!*

For a moment I cling to the casement, scrabbling like a cat half-fallen from a wall; in that incredible moment I have leaned forward to shout and have all but pitched out through the window; and what of my destiny then?

Back at last and looking outward:

And the gate is lead, and shrunken, and the gnomes but a herd of ghosts; I stand not on a mighty parapet, but on the roof of a byre. Gone are the swan pools, the great gray halls, the soft-footed dancers and the grape-girls. Atlantes, mighty Atlantes, lies on his back with his eyes glazed and the bright blood flowing from his broken head ... lying, *aiee!* like a goatherd after a bottle-fight on market day. And his steed—but horror itself! has she then turned the hippogriff into a milch cow? May the mandrake curdle her bowels if she's harmed my hippogriff!

Ah but no; there he stands, the blazing beauty, and throws back his eagle's head, and hurls his joy away to the farthest mountains. I mingle my shout with his, leap free of the wall, and run and tumble down the meadow.

In a transport I stretch myself against the unenchanted grass, and twist and turn in it until I can smell its sweet green ichor; and in just such a turning mine eyes fall upon her who stands meekly by, her two hands folded about the piece of her broken staff, her eyes downcast—but not so far they see me not.

"But 'tis thee, my warrior-maid!" I roar. "Here to me lass, and I'll buss thee well for thy trouble!"

But she stands where she is, so I must go to her. That at least I can do; has she not set me free?

(Or is she here to imprison me again? Destiny, now, is not fragile; yonder's a fractured magician for proof. Still—) "How do they call thee, maid?"

"Bradamante," says she; now, the Arabs breed a long-maned horse, and in the distance that silken banner on their necks looks like this maid's lashes close to.

"Well, Bradamante, I owe thee my freedom if not my life. And should I pay the reckoning, what would thee do with them?"

Up to me she looks, with a deep calm which destroys my reckless smile; and up past me she looks further; and she says gently, "I would do the Lord's will with them."

"Call me not Lord!" I cry; this creature embarrasses me.

"I was not." Quiet as ever, her voice, yet somehow she chides me. "I meant the Lord Whom I serve, Who is King of kings."

"Is He now! And what would He have thee do with a belly-hungry, prison-broke hellion of a swordless knight?"

"If thou wilt serve Him—"

"Hold, lass. Yon wizard told me a tale of thee and me betrothed, and crawling the mud like worms among worms with never a jewel to our cloaks. He said 'twas my destiny to be freed by thee, and free me thee did. Though I can't say how."

"I but struck him with my staff."

"Na, lass. Even I could never do that; he could not be touched."

She gives me her hand; I take it and then follow her gaze to it. It wears a simple golden ring. Gently she frees herself and removes the ring. "The Lord sent this my way; who wears it is proof against all enchantments. I need it no longer." The ring flashes in the sun as she casts it aside; with my quick thumb and forefinger I pluck it out of the air.

"But keep it, Bradamante! Thee cannot discard such a treasure!"

"It was given me to free thee, and thou art free. As to the future—the Lord will provide."

I slip the ring upon my smallest finger, and though it is thick as her thumb, the ring clasps me like mine own. (Even without it, girl, thee'd have better fortune with an angry basilisk than thee would with me, if thee would persuade me to join thee on thy rocky pilgrimages. But now—) "This much of my destiny is

complete, then, Bradamante, and I am in thy debt. But surely the wizard was wrong about the rest of it."

"It is in the hands of the Lord."

"Thee doesn't expect me to cast aside my brocades for a scratchy gown like thine, and go with thee among the peasants!"

"We do as the Lord directs. We do it freely and with all our hearts, and are saved, or we do it blindly until we end in darkness; but serve Him we shall."

Such confidence is more unnerving than any magic. "I cannot believe that."

"*Will* not," she corrects me calmly.

"But I've choice! Here we stand, Bradamante, and in the next heartbeat I might slay thee or woo thee or bite thee or fall on the earth and gobble grass; and which of these things I do is for me to decide!"

Slowly and so surely she shakes her head. "It is in thee to serve the Lord, else I should not have been sent to thee. Choice thee has: Thee may serve Him willingly or thee may serve Him blindly; and none has a third way."

"Thee cannot force—"

She puts up her hands. "We do not force. We do not kill. We need not. The Lord—"

"Thy Lord let thee kill Atlantes!"

"No, Rogero. He is not dead."

I spring to the crumpled magician; and indeed, he is but stunned. I snatch out his own poiniard, and instantly, under its point, Bradamante thrusts her firm brown arm. "The Lord will take him in his own time, Rogero. Spare him."

"Spare him! He would have killed thee!"

"But he did not. He too is a servant of God, though unwilling. Spare him."

I fling down the blade so violently that nought but the jewelled knob at the hilt-top shows between the grass-blades. "Then I will; and having done thee the one service, I shall call my debts discharged. Art satisfied, girl?"

She makes my head bubble, this quiet creature; and I recall Atlantes' scoffing words, that this dedicated beetle of a Bradamante shall think more of her faith than of my flesh, and that she shall have more brains than I.

Her lashes fall, and "Sobeit," she says, and not another word.

I need my sword, and to get it I must turn my back on her—a good need. So up the slope I go lightly, just as if her very presence were not like a heat on my shoulder blades. I close my eyes as I spring up the smooth grassway, and it does nothing to shut her out.

Patience, Rogero! Down the hill, over the rise, and she'll be forgotten!

And in any case, one could come back if one must ...

So I let my eyes come open again, and gasp; for there stands the hippogriff, and he has never let me come so close. If I am to continue upward I must go round him, or I must move him. For a split second I falter, and his great head comes round to me; and oh, I've looks in the wells of Kazipon which are bottomless, I've followed the light of my torch in the endless caverns of Qual, and I've known a night when the stars went out; and never before have I looked into such depths and such reaches as the eyes in his eagle head. True bird's eyes they are, fierce in their very structure and unreadable. Through them the beast sees—what? A soft sac of blood and bones to be a sheath for that golden beak ... or a friend ... or a passing insect ... I should flee. I should stand. I should sidle about him and be wary. I should, I should—

But I shall ride him!

I finish my stride and go straight to him, and when my hand falls on his purple shoulder he swings his head forward and high, and trembles so that from his wings comes a sound like soft rain on a silken tent. My heart leaps so that I must leap with it or lose it, and with a single motion I am on his back and my knees have him. *Aiee!* such a shout comes from me, it would rival his own; it is full of the joyous taste of terror. With it I fetch him a buffet on the withers which jars me to the very neckbones, and before I can feel the blow as any more than a shock, his wings are open and thrusting, and he rears and *leaps* ...

It is a leap that never will end; fast he flies and faster hurtling higher just at the angle of his leap, and the surges of his body are most strange to a horseman. Only the glint of the golden ring convinces me that we are not involved in an enchantment; for flying sunward warms nothing, curious as it may seem, and the bright air grows cold as the hoary hinges of perdition's door.

I think of poor sod-shackled Bradamante, and look back and down; but by now she is lost in that indeterminate new place

between haze and horizon, and there, for all of me, she may stay. I shrug, and find that I have not shrugged away the picture of her face, which is strange, since it is hardly one worth remembering. Surely, Rogero, thou art not smitten?

With her? With—*that*?

Ah no, it could not be. There must be something else, something buried in the whole mosaic of our meeting. Of our parting ... ah; that was it!

Atlantes is not dead.

That in itself is nothing. Atlantes distant is, to me, as good as Atlantes dead. But Atlantes slowly waking in the meadow, his enchantments all destroyed, his shield and steed gone—and the peaceful author of his ruin doubtless helping him to his feet with her sturdy unwomanly hands ... this is another matter.

But forget it! The sly-tongued termagant could, by the time Atlantes was fully conscious, have him so morassed in debate he would forget to be angry. Bradamante has a most powerful helplessness; she attacks with the irresistible weapon of being unarmed, immobilizes the enemy by surrendering, and at last sits on his feeble form, holding by the great weight of her passivity. I need not fear for Bradamante.

But the ring flicks a mote of light into mine eye, and I know I have taken her last defense and left her at the mercy of the merciless, and this is small thanks indeed for what she dared for me.

But what else would a knight, a true knight, do?

One thing a knight would do, I tell myself bitterly, is to regain his sword if he lost it, and not pleasure himself with a hippogriff, however beautiful. Thou art no knight, Rogero; not yet, not again. Regain thine own holy blade, its very hilt encrusted with thy sacred promises, ere thee call thyself knight again.

Back, then, for the sword, and decide then about the maiden; and keep thyself armed with the thought of thy destiny—it is with her, and means soaking in meekness until I am mushy as bread in a milk bowl ... *no!* by the heart of the fire in the nethermost pit, I shall get my blade and hew out a new destiny!

There are no reins, and I remember that the magician controlled the beast with words. “Enough, my beauty!” I cry. “Back now—take me back!” And somewhere inside a voice sniggers *Thee deludes thyself with the matter of the sword; it’s the*

plight of the maid that drives thee. “No!” I cry, “she shall not have me! Let her King of kings save her, she’s His ward, not mine!” And I thump the hippogriff with my hard-tooled heels: “Back, my beauty, take me back!”

And the hippogriff tilts to the wind, and balances and sails as before, for these are not the magic words.

“Turn! Turn!” I bellow, rowelling him. I ball my fist and sink half of it in the feathered root of his neck just forward of the shoulder; for by this, if rightly done, one may stagger a horse. “Mule!” I shriek. “Turn thy spavined carcass about ere I tie a knot in thy neck!”

At this the eagle’s head turns about like an owl’s and the measureless eyes loom over me. Slowly the beak opens that I may see the spear tip and the scissor sides of that frightful weapon. Like a blind animal, the gray-pink tongue shifts enough for any soldier. Fear, however, is an assistant to safety only up to a point, and I am far past it. “Go back, aborted monster, ere I snatch out that ugly horn and crack thine eyeballs together! By the pleasure-bred blood of thy half-bred dam and the—” Thus far I rant, and he strikes. And would he had killed with the one stroke; for instead he has slipped the point of his beak between my saddle and my hams, and I am flipped, unharmed and sore humiliated, high in the air over him. I am spinning like a broken lance, or the earth is circling me head to heel, chased by a blazing band of sun. I see the glory-tinted wings below me, too small and far away; around I go and see them again closer; and again, and this time I must touch, clutch; I claw my hands and flex my legs, and turn again—and the hippogriff slips away to the side to let me plunge past him.

I cover my eyes and I scream; I scream till my tendons cannot bear it, sob and scream again fit to startle the starlings off every bank from here to Brookline, Mass. I recant, I’ll accept my destiny and honestly wed the little brown nun, if she’ll have me; ay, and do for her Lord what paltry dog-tricks He’ll ask of me; only make this hippogriff, this lovely, legitimate, honorable beauty of a hippogriff save me. *Aiee!* and I’ll lie on my back on a scaffold and paint Thee murals, Lord, and I swear never to punch Miss Brandt in the eye, or anywhere else again, if thee’ll but send me a cloud or an eagle or a parachute or a helicopter ... oh holy Pete, what a spot for him to lose his mind in and be me again. I wonder if he

knows it won't take any real time at all, where he is. And there below me the mottled earth pursues a sun-turned-rocket ... whew. Giles, old boy, don't you shut your eyes again until you have to—"Hullo!"

There at the area railing stands a smut-faced urchin and a smaller but female version of himself, all eyeballs and streaky cheeks. "Gee, mister, you all right? You sick?" and the smaller one: "Canchasee, he's *dyne*!"

"Don't mind me, kids," I mumble. "I just fell off a hippogriff." I find I'm half-kneeling and try to stand, and it seems my hands are locked around the iron uprights of the railing. I stay there stopped and feeling very foolish while they watch me, and I concentrate from my stone-cold marrow up and out until at last my left fingers begin to stir. With a little more effort the hand comes free, and with it I disengage the right, one finger at a time. I straighten up then and look a while at my hands and wiggle them. "He ain't dyne," says the boy in a robbed tone, and his cohort says defensively, "Anyway he *wuz* dyne," because her ardent hopes had made it her production.

Briefly, a sun flashes past, but I ignore it; I'll be all right now. You get so you know the signs. "Here," I say, "I'll try to do better next time," and I give them money, I don't know how much but it must be enough; they beat it.

I put my elbows on the railing, keeping these spastic hands away from it, and look across the street. The clock hands haven't moved any that I can see, and Miss Brandt, who was just starting out the door when my addled brains caught up with me, is pausing on the portico, the door just closing behind her. Two seconds, three maybe. My God, what a way to live!

Miss Brandt looks up the street and down, descends the shallow steps and turns right toward the old Mayor's statue. When she has quite gone I cross to the bank and go inside. At the island table I write a check, and take it to the wicket where the fierce-faced man is caged. He takes the paper and turns it over with the same snap Mr. Saffron used, and that is a trick I must learn one day. "You'll need to get this initialed," he says. So off I go to Mr. Saffron again, and stand in front of his shiny desk until he looks up at me and makes the pink meaty ridge across and above his narrowed eyes. The man disapproves of me to the point of ecstasy, and I take this as a kindness; for it makes us both feel

important. I let the check fall to him, and he looks, snaps, looks, and grunts. "All right, Mr. Ahh," he says, and squiggles on it with his personal pen. I take the check and stand where I am.

"Well?"

"I want to know whose money this is."

"Yours." He has a way of snapping off the margins of his words as if he doesn't want you to have a whole one.

"Yes, but—"

"The deposit is in your name; surely that's sufficient!"

I look at the check. "Is there any more left?"

He is offended by the whole thing, but he is stuck with it. "There is," he says.

"Much?"

"More than you can spend today," he says. "Or this week."

"Well, dammit, how *much*?"

He sort of spreads his pale-pink hands, which means, I gather, that this is not an account like other accounts, and he wishes he could do something about the irregularity but he can't. He says, "That is the one and final checkbook you get. Aside from that, there doesn't seem to—ahh—be any upper limit. And now you'll excuse me, I've a great deal to good day Mr. Mmmm." And down he goes to his papers.

Well, I've asked enough questions to know there won't be any answers. I go back to the wicket and slide the fierce one the check. "Half in hundreds and the rest in small bills." He makes a long snort or a short sigh, clicks the bars between us down tight, lets himself out the back with a key, and is gone for too long, but I don't mind about that just now. Pretty soon he's back with a sack. He opens the wicket and starts taking stacks out of the sack and sliding them to me. The sixty hundreds go into my socks; they have elastic tops and pull up high enough. The sixty fifties fan out flat enough to go between my belly and my knit shorts, though they hump up some. Then I spend some time with the hundred and eighty twenties and tens, cramming 'em into two side and one back pants pocket. By now I'm lumpy as a sofa cushion just out of the wet wash and I've collected quite a crowd. The fierce face flutes, "You're going to run into trouble, carrying all that money that way," as if it was a wish, and I say "No, I won't. They all think I'm crazy, and there's no telling what a crazy man will do." I say it good and loud, and all the people

watching stop their buzz-buzz and back off a little. They make a wide empty aisle for me when I start away.

“Wait!” cries the teller, and punches some keys on his little machine. Coins slide down the half-spiral chute and pile up in the cup at the botttom with a cast-iron clink. “Wait! Here’s your twenty-eight cents!”

“Keep it!” I bellow from the door, and go out feeling a lot happier than I’ve been feeling lately. All my life I’ve wanted to leave twenty-eight cents for a bank teller, who wouldn’t put it in his pocket to save his soul, and who hasn’t got any place for it in his books.

Down the street there’s a big men’s shop with little letters over the door and a windowful of somber-colored suits with no creases in the jacket-arms. I look them over until I find the one with the most pockets and then I go inside.

It’s like a church in there, but with wall-to-wall broadloom, and the only showcases I can see are the two little ones set into mahogany pillars, one with tie-clasps and collar pins, one with four hand-painted silk ties. I go look at the first one. Every velvet box has a humble little card with “the” on it: *\$200 the set. \$850 the pair*. I’m on my way to look at the ties when a tall man with a paper carnation steps out of a potted palm and stands where I have to run him down in case I’m not going to stop.

“What,” he says, “do you want?” The “you” is a little bigger than the other words and the whole thing sounds like he’s pretty disgusted. I tell him about the suit in the window.

He laughs with his mouth. “That is a three-hundred-dollar suit.”

“Well, drag it on out.”

“I’m rawtha sure we don’t carry your size,” he says, looking at my painting pants.

“Then we’ll hack it till it fits,” I tell him. “Come on, buster, quit stalling.”

“I’m afraid that—”

So I start yelling a little and he backs off and bleats “Mr. Triggles, Mr. Triggles!” and from somewhere—I guess another potted palm, there’s plenty around—comes another tall man in the same sort of funeral suit, but this one’s got a real carnation. “Here,” he says, “Here-here-here. What’s this, what?”

“You’re selling, I’m buying. Only he don’t think so,” I tell the

real carnation, pointing at the paper one.

The paper one says, "The gentleman—" (dirtiest word I ever heard, the way he says it)—"The gentleman is inquiring after the von Hochmann worsted in the window."

The real carnation nickers. "My good man, I'm afraid you've come to the wrong—" and then I put twenty dollars in his hand. He looks at it and the other one looks at it so I give him one too. They look at each other, so I pass out two more. "Get the suit."

"Won't you step into the sample room?" says the real carnation, and you wouldn't know it was the same man. It certainly isn't the same voice. "We have quite a selection in—"

"I don't want a selection, I want that suit in the window. That very goddam selfsame suit and not one like it."

"Oh but we can't get a suit out of the—" So I give them each twenty dollars. "Yes, *sir!*" says the paper one, and dives to the front.

"Now, let's see," says the real carnation, pulling at his chin and trying to imagine me with my face washed. "Once we get the suit out of the way, we'll look at some cravats, and perhaps an English broadcloth, hmmm? Handmade? Rolled collar, studs? Yes indeedy."

"No indeedy. I got a shirt." I pluck at the yellow ski-pajama top. This shuts him up without any money changing hands.

The other tall man comes back with the suit and we parade into the fitting room which looks more than ever like part of a funeral home, only bigger. The two of them stand in the middle of the room wringing or rubbing their hands while I step into a curtained booth and put the suit on. The pants got no cuffs yet and the coat's too tight. I come out and they jump all over me like Hansel and Gretel on the gingerbread house. When they get to measuring the pants they find out I still got my old ones on underneath. Forty dollars fixes that up too, before they can say anything.

So when they're finished chalking and pinning they want to know when I want the suit. "Now!" I roar, and before either or them can so much as "But we—" I give them money again. "How many people you got back in there, altering?"

"Eight, sir."

"Well, here." I give him eight twenties. "Give 'em this and put 'em all to work on this one suit. You've got nine minutes."

"Yes, sir," and off goes paper carnation, breathing hard.

The other one says, "You said you were in the movie line?"

"I did not."

"Ahh," he says. "Oil."

"Nup. Ladies' wear. I put out a line of underskirts with prints of umbrellas and telephones on 'em. You've seen 'em."

"I—ahh—don't know that I have."

"What?" I shout, "You never heard of a Freudian slip?"

"Why, I—" and after that he shuts up. He keeps looking at me.

They don't get the suit ready in nine minutes, but they make it in eleven. As soon as the man shows with the suit over his arm, I tell him, "Hey, I forgot. I want the left sleeve three-eighths of an inch shorter than the right one." His jaw drops, but the real carnation says, "Do it, Hopkinson." And the other one goes out with the suit, me diving along right behind him. We get to a door about the same time. Inside is a real patchy workroom with bright lights and racks of old suits, two old women and six old men. "But sir, you can't—"

"Shut up and give me that," I say, and snatch the suit. "I didn't want the sleeve fixed, I just wanted to see these people. Listen," I say to the whole room, "Did he give you any money just now, this guy with the paper flower?"

All those old people stand and blink at me till somebody says "Money?" and then they all shrug their shoulders and wag their heads. Paper flower, all nods and smiles, steps forward and says, "Why, I was going to give it to them just as soon as the suit was satisfactory," and he takes eight twenties out of his side pocket. I bang them out of his hand and stick them into my pants. "You were like hell, you crumb." I go down into my sock and haul out the pack of hundreds and go around the room giving one each to the old people. The real carnation sticks his head in just then and I tell him, "You better get that guy out of my sight before something happens around here even my money won't fix." The paper flower disappears.

I go back to the booth and this time I take off the old pants. I spread the money around through all the pockets in the suit—it's got fourteen—and get dressed. I give the carnation three hundred dollars and my old pants. "You keep 'em. They should fit pretty good." I have to admire him; I can see he's all aquiver inside, but he still walks like a bishop at a coronation as we go to the door,

and as he walks he's carefully folding my old pants, which hasn't happened since I brought them home from Kresge's two years ago, until they hang as flat as an antimacassar over his forearm. He opens the door for me and by God, *bows*. "Thank you so much, and come back to us soon, Mr. Freud."

It's close to nighttime, eating time. Around the corner and up the street is a restaurant I've heard about that used to be a stable. I'm just pushing through the door when in front of me there grows a soft wall made of maroon serge and brass buttons and a monstrous braided golden silk rope. I step back and look up, and it isn't a wall, but the prow of a commodore-type doorman; and I swear he's eight feet tall before the hat starts.

"Sorry, sir; you can't go in like that."

The suit, it seems, gets me a "sir" but not any courtesy in the voice. "Like what?"

He puts up a hand like a punching bag and taps himself on the Adam's apple. I put up my hand and touch only my yellow ski pajama top. "Oh, the tie," I say.

"Oh," he says, "the tie." Mimicking somebody like that, now that's for murder; that's worse than what Rogero called the hippogriff. "Well, you didn't happen to notice I got no tie."

He pushes out his chest. It looms up and over me like the business end of a hydraulic forging press. "I did happen to notice you got no tie," he says, still copying my voice and you know? He's pretty good at it.

"You did, for sure?" I say, and give him twenty dollars.

"Well, kind of one-eyed I did," he says in a new voice which wasn't mine and wasn't the "sir" voice I first heard, but one which seems to come easiest of all to him. I give him another twenty, and he lets me go in.

A man meets me at the inner door—quite a man, boiled shirt, tailcoat, and the magnificent head you see in college lobbies, the oil painting of the previous Dean. With one flick of his eyes—and mind you, the light's not too good just there—he does with me what Mr. Saffron does with a check; he reads me, turns me over with a snap, puts his squiggle on me so that inside man will do what's absolutely correct. It must be a problem, with the new suit and the worn shoes and the dirty face and the fact that the doorman let me in; but if it bothers him he doesn't show it. "Good evening, sir," he says. His tone has the depth of one of

those console radios they built in the thirties, when the more money you had, the more bass you bumped your belly with. "Step right this way."

But I knock his elbow. "It bothers you I got no necktie."

"Why—no, sir."

"Yes it does." I take out a hundred-dollar bill and fold it lengthwise and pleat it good and tight, and then I take a fifty and fold it flat and narrow, and wind it once around the middle of the hundred. Then I take the two pleated ends and spread them so I have a bow, tied in the middle. He stands there waiting for me as if people did this kind of thing all the time. "Now lend me the pin off that flower of yours." He hands it to me, carrying it the last half inch of the way by a subtle and courteous bow from the waist. I pin the bow to the front of my yellow ski-pajama top. "A tie. Okay with you?"

"Quite suitable, sir."

"I thought you'd like it." I pull it off and hand it to him. "I want a table for eight on the edge of the floor."

"Yes, sir. I have just the one." Off he goes, and me after him, and sure enough, there's a big round table. He plucks a subdued ivory *Reserved* card off it and sits me down. "And when do you expect the rest of your party?"

"I'm the rest of the party."

"Very good, sir. And you're drinking—"

"Brandy. Double. The kind that nobody but you knows is the best in the place."

"I have just the year. Water? Soda?"

"Yoghurt," I say. "About half-and-half."

"Right away, sir."

So I have that and a liver and oatmeal sandwich and crepes suzettes with a jubilee sauce made (by four men with three shiny carts) with those little tiny wild French strawberries, and you know? It costs eighty-four bucks to eat in that place.

I sit and I watch the show, and I watch the watchers watching the show. And I plan the things I shall do with more money than I can spend. I shall leave here when it is too late to hire anything and I'll make my money rent a powerboat. I'll leave twice the price with the owner and I'll sink it, and never be seen again by him, so he'll wonder. I'll buy two islands with two mansions, and on one I'll pretend to be a prude while through an agent I'll lease

everything but my house to nudists; and the other island I'll populate with prudes while I go naked. I'll buy Thomas Moore's own harp from the Institute and build in a contact microphone and a music box which will play "Red Wing" for forty minutes at double tempo if anyone touches it. I'll train up a man who can fascinate as many hungry people as Huey Long and as many frightened people as Joe McCarthy, both at the same time, and when he takes over he'll pull a switch on them all and be as gentle and as poor and as strong as Jesus of Nazareth. And I'll supply every male teen-ager with a hand-tainted pie, and every female with a totally new orgasmic term to apply to sundaes, convertibles, knobby-faced pop vocalists and shoes straps. For Bradamante a transparent lipstick so she can feel like a woman even if she doesn't want it to show, and for Atlantes (poor little rich man) the full realization of destiny's indestructibility.

Look yonder: look! There by herself, with a candle on her table, sits the most beautiful woman who ever lived. Her hair is soft sable, long, straight, fine, and thick; her eyes and cheekbones the delicate strong interacting Eurasian arch-sequence. Her nostrils are petal-textured, moving as indetectably as the shift from one aurora-pattern to the next, but sensitively in motion even from her shallow breathing as she sits still, so still ... and surely she is the saddest woman who ever lived, or a mouth such as hers could not be sleeping so, nor the head turned and held just that way of all ways, nor the shoulders so careless and the hands so forgotten. Is she grieving from loneliness, in the knowledge that never in life can she meet her like? Or has she been hurt by a small someone, and cannot understand?

I raise a hand, and the Dean-faced obsolescent console drifts to me. "Who is she?"

"I'll find out for you in a moment, sir."

"No, don't!" It bursts from me. "Please don't." (Now, why not?) "You mustn't do that."

"Very well, sir," and as if he senses my distress, "really I won't."

"Why is she so sad?" And I don't know I've spoken until he answers: "I think she has been disappointed, sir. She has been sitting there alone for a long while." He bends a little closer, as if to add a great importance to what he has to say. "I think, sir, that she is very young."

And somehow I understand precisely what he means; he means that she is frightened, but will not suggest fear in the burnished security of this moneyed place, of which he is such a piece.

Fear ... there are fears and fears, depending upon one's origins and sense of value. Seimel, who hunts tigers with a spear, faces death without fear, and I know a man who is struck numb at the sound of a key in a Yale lock; who's to say which terror is great or small, or that it's a small thing to be a girl who dare not leave a table because she has no money? "Well, let her go. I'll take her check."

"Yes, sir." His glossy finish emits, like an alpha particle, a brief flash of approval. "Shall I take her your card?"

"Oh God no!" Again the thought of knowing her at all distresses me. "Just say a hippogriff flew by."

Unperturbed he says, "Quite, sir," and, as a good piece of furniture should, rolls silently and unbendingly away on his casters.

I wait, and I wait; and there coming in is a chinchilla coat which will be flung over a chair somewhere just under a light, and yonder a fat face laughs too loudly; the trombone, part of a chord, still gives me two notes exactly right for a girl's inexpressible loneliness and my feelings about it, and the man with the shiny cart moves the heel of a silver spoon deftly through the pure transparent heat springing bluely from the bubbling blood of the jubilee ... and as if by accident, the fine Dean's head bows over the girl's table and he speaks to her.

Her face, when she looks up, blinds me for a moment. Or maybe my tears do. She radiates no happiness—some great grief is bred too deeply into this girl's fine bones—but there is a change which permits hands to be remembered and a mouth to live again. It could have been fear and its removal, an excision which works wonders with dogs and humans, and might, I imagine, even with nations.

And so she may turn her head away from sorrow, and when she does, the breath catches in my throat; in the nocturnal texture of her hair lies a single streak of silver, a hue of just the deadness, just the distance of a winter moon. No other color could treat with such precision of an inherent sorrow, and no other creature has been so correctly branded as this girl.

I saw motion pictures of a lily growing; shoot to blossom in a

brace of seconds; and as it rose and burst, so she rises and shakes back her hair. I saw a strand of spider web drift by and away, streaming; and so she passes. I saw a bird die in the hollow of my hand, its open crystal eyes unchanging; and so I sit now unchanged, except that something is gone out of me.

I shall invoke Rogero, and escape from this tomb into terror; I shall not wait for a summons to his world. Better to be falling away through a shining sky with angry wings above me and a sudden quiet below, than to sit here in the meshes of my several madnesses. Insanity is only wisdom of a sort; too deeply driven for the sphincters of the mind to compass; and this is the riddle of the sphinx. Brushless Giles, the ex-painter, is (when you come right down to it) a far wiser person than Swordless Rogero, ex-knight. Put me on a hippogriff without a driver's license and I won't sit and bawl, "Back, sir!"; I'll push the buttons and pull the levers and watch what happens until I can back into anybody's downhill driveway. And if words are the reins, the throttle, and clutch, then words I'll try, until at last I have a "Gee" for him and a "Haw" for him and above all a big fat "Whoa!" Rogero, now, he's a fool, and rather healthier than I and therefore more alive; his uncertainties are a little less well-founded in fact than mine. *Whoosh!* and is that the hot, gentle ignition of brandy over yonder, or the sun passing my feet? Is that polite patter halfhearted applause for the band or is it the wind in the wings of the wheeling beast above me? Catch me, catch me, good knight and I shall die gladly with thee, free of both these insupportable worlds. But I am not falling; I hang here in dusk, supported by a rushing wind, a central point for the looming earth and hurtling sun as they rotate about me. (And if hanging thou art, why are the crags of Earth larger each time they pass thee?) *Aiee*, could I but die of foolhardiness, like a Bradamante challenging the powers of evil, and not thus crotch-flung in penance for the silly vapors of my foul mouth, not humiliated and screaming like a whipped serf. (Waiter, bring me an orchestra playing Rampart Street, I have fallen from Grace, who is a hippogriff.)

Shining one, can thee not forgive me my temper and my tongue? Is there nothing in thee which recalls the swift romp on Atlantes' mountain, and thee dancing away from me like a playmate, sharing my joy? *That* is Rogero, good hippogriff, and not the furious mote who offended thee ... I'll beg thee no more,

but pray only that thee might escape thy conscience, as I failed to do when I left my sword and my destiny with Bradamante.

And he comes, he comes, his wings all but folded, back-bent, beating a very buzz to fly downward faster than I can fall. And faster he is; he looms to me, blasts himself to one side so close he tumbles me anew, so that the sun is still above me, but below the mountains turn like clay on a potter's wheel. The hippogriff's wings are wide now, and working weightily, and again he grows in mine eye; and now I can hear him; he is screaming, screaming ... gods! What a terror-struck cry! Then the screaming stops, and his lion's voice rumbles with laughter—ah, he mocks me, he mocks me, the son of ... of a mighty gryphon and a blooded mare, most beautiful of creatures. There, hippogriff: mock me, it is thy privilege; let me die, it is thy right.

And again the thunder of his humor; he twists his wings one up, one down, rolling like a summer swallow; and as I fall to meet him he is on his back like a swimmer, and, blessed angel of a hippogriff, he takes me!

I hang from his talons like a newt, mine eyes a-pop from the pressure of his holding and the surge of his climb; and climb he must for he has caught me in a valley, no further aloft than the height of a tall pine tree; the mountains all about are above us. He could not have waited the tenth part of a heartbeat and saved me still. He is confident and beautiful and he has a most cruel sense of humor.

I am lifted now to his beak; I face his eyes, and from his open maw his laughter rumbles, and I like a captured puppy plead to be set down. And indeed, had I a tail I'd wag for him; I'd whimper if I felt it would reach him.

He dips his head and turns it, and his beak's about my waist. Now he lifts me, turns his head back to front, lowers me, twists that my feet may go down and my head up—and I am astride him again, perched on his shoulders a forearm's span away from the saddle. He nudges me back, and I bump my way to the saddle like a babe on a fence-prop, bottom foremost and clumsy with fright. Not until I am firm in the saddle does he release me; indeed, for a moment it occurs to me that, purely in jest, he might bit me in twain once I think I am safe. Through my thighs I sense another thunderous chuckle at my expense. I bite my lip and cast mine eyes down, but there is no escaping his mirth.

Now the mountains are behind. The sea is a haze and the sky sea-colored, and where they meet there is no longer a line, by a twist of my mind I may imagine naught but sky around us in an Earthless universe, and a twist again, and it is the sea all about, up and over, my hippogriff and I the sole population of an empty bubble in a universe of water.

And it comes to me then, like a sending—words, odd and small: “Gee,” and “Haw,” and “Whoa!” and each carries the nostriled flavor of Giles and the smoke in his mouth. So “Gee!” I murmur—and my hippogriff wheels: “Haw,” say I, and the other way he turns ... I can ride him, fly him! He is mine, he is mine!

But mine too is the humiliation, and the lesson of his laughter, cackling like a conscience. Ahead is the sea, across it adventure and freedom. Behind are the hills, and my sword, my duty, my debt, and a weaponless wench. My steed is silent, as if waiting: “So *haw* then, and let me be damned to my destiny,” I cry, and he swings about to tuck the distant shore under his golden chin; to take me back to my grubby fate. And grubby or not, I preen; I am a knight who will not be swayed or turned aside; straight to my sword I will fly, to mine honor, to—

But below, a clot of white on the rock takes mine eye, and “*Whoa!*” I cry with all my heart; and the hippogriff’s bellow of laughter fairly puts whitecaps on the waves below. And down we drop, and down, the roar and crash of beastly laughter in the van, the flanks, the trailing wind of our descent. There is a peal of it for knights without swords, for true courses set and forsaken; there’s a rumbling gust of it for gratitude confessed but unpaid, and one for the man who would plan an escape for himself if he were on time to rescue a maiden in peril, or who would plant a bluebell for her if he were late, if he happened to pass that way. But the shrillest laughter, the one having the most cold gold eagle in it, was for a knight who claimed to value his sword for the vows it carried.

I have a moment of shame and one of fury, and then a tortured time of both together. All I need to do to cut off this obscene bellowing—ay, and gain the beast’s respect, I wouldn’t doubt—is to press my heels to his flanks, and straight to Atlantes’ mountain we’d go; to Bradamante; to my sword; to the completion of my promises and the payment of my debts.

And it is in the muscles of my legs to dray back those heels; it

is in my heart to be humble and accept the beast's deafening censure and cleanse myself; it is, it is, but once again I look below, and am lost; for chained to the rock is a naked woman of such unearthly beauty she can be compared only with the hooded shield I carry ... with this difference: that whosoever looks upon this shield is blinded, but who looks upon this woman sees so clearly that he cannot live.

Down comes my steed and hovers, searching for a foothold on the windswept rock; and finding it, settles in. Before he is fully earth-borne I am away from him and his subsiding chuckles, slipping and scrambling to the seaward slope. Braced against the iron loops to which she is chained, I cower down close to her, cover mine eyes against that blaze, not of light, but of beauty; and when I can, I peer quickly through my fingers and drink the vision in small and frightened sips.

Her ankles are cruelly bound by a single hoop, hinged, hasped by the double chain which anchors it below. A smaller version of the same device was given each slender wrist, and there she lies, stretched tight against the cold rock, wet with spray, and the wind tugging her hair.

I touch the shackles, the chains. Anchored as they are, it seems the rock itself would lift from the sea bottom before those loops could be drawn. Turning hopelessly from this examination, I meet her eyes and the impact melts me; I fall to my knees and bow my head.

"Who art thou?" she whispers into the shouting wind.

"Roger, a knight, come to save thee. Who has done this to thee, princess?... surely thou art princess ...?"

"Ay," she breathes, "Angelica of Cathay, shipwrecked here on the very day the oracle at Ebuda demanded the most beautiful Ebudan maid as a sacrifice to some wrathful god. But since they had me ..."

"Ebuda is that village yonder?"

"Ay." Ah, but she is weary; her voice may be heard at all only because its sound is so very different; it differs, almost, from sound itself. "But go not to the village, good knight; they are barbarians and would tear thee to pieces rather than replace me with one of their own. Best go whence thee came, and my blessing goes with thee; but I am doomed."

"To die of cold and the pecks of sea eagles? I'll die here with

thee rather!"

"Nay, it will be quicker than that," she murmurs. "Knowest the monster Orc?" Her eyes are calm, seaward now. As the wind tumbles her hair, I see that it is mystically marked with a stripe of cold silver; there has never been anything so lovely and far away as that swath of starshine.

"Orc? Oh, ay; a legend, a tale to frighten children. He is big as an island and has scales of iron and the tusks of a boar. And thou art chained here for Orc? The eagles will have thee before such a fable comes."

"But he comes now," she says calmly; and two things happen to me which will leave their mark for all my days; one, that as she speaks, grave and quite contained, her tears flow and I know that I saw a strength here as wondrous as her beauty; but for the tears, she might have been in her garden, half dreaming and at peace, for all her face showed it. And I turn away from her and see the second thing, the monster Orc.

With a shout I spin to Angelica, take her prisoned hand and on it slip my golden ring. "This will guard thee, Princess!" I cry, and my heart cries with it, *only from my shield*, and I stumble to the hippogriff.

He is ready, flexed, spread, trembling to be off; I have but one foot in the stirrup as he launches himself. The monster comes, and we fly out to meet it; and when we have flown what seemed far enough at first, there is yet another mile to go. It looms over us like a thundercloud; it rises higher and higher from the water, and there is more and still more of it, shapeless, immeasurable, and blind.

Blind! Swordless, lacking pike or halberd, axe or hook, mine only weapon is a giver of blindness; against this, the monster brings the only possible defense; "Blind, it is blind," I cry, and my mount utters a shriek, part despair, but a fine part challenge, and mounts to the sky to get above the creature and be sure.

And still it rises until we are but a wasp at a bull's shoulder, until the black rock below is but a steppingstone to this great living hulk.

And the hippogriff, unbidden, folds his wings and we drop, down and down past the upright acres of filthy, streaming iron. I am past thought, incapable of anything except keeping my saddle in the weightless drop. Even my first long fall from the beast's

back had seemed not so long as this. Then out comes the wings, and I groan against the pressure inside my doublet. Down we go still, the hippogriff battling the wind of our fall, and checking us at last.

We are in a roaring, stinking stream of water and evil fumes, somewhere between Orc's looming bulk and the black rock. Across, and turn, and back, and turn; steamed and spumed and soaked and splattered with stiff salt slime. And for the second time that day I face death despised by the hippogriff ...

I see his face again, I think for the last time. And had I years of life to give for the ability to read those bright implacable eyes, I would do it, and gladly; but I've but a few weary minutes. I gaze up hopelessly, and he brings his shining head closer to me, touches my head with a rough gentleness. With his eyes on mine, he makes a single soft sound, and then it is time to turn again. It seems for a moment he cannot and then he does, bravely, and labors back again. Belatedly I see that his wings are wet, and like Pegasus near death in dragon's blood, he cannot remain aloft much longer. Ah, to know what it was he tried to tell me! Who would know? Giles? Ah, but I hate what I was, and what I am ...

Together we scream a challenge, and the hippogriff finds strength, somehow, to drive up twice, three times the height of a man and, descending, flutter away a great weight of water from his wings. He passes close to the widening mouth, drives down near the hinge of the jaw just as it emerges. What appears at first as a bony projection from the hinge is suddenly a slimy opal, alight and alive—Orc's eye, set like a whale's. The hippogriff must have known, he must have known!

His small downward drive gives us speed—almost too much. As if alive, however, the shield trembles under my hands, turns to the sun for a bright beam, and hurls it across and back, on, and into the eye. And then we are past and tilting steeply; once more the hippogriff shivers away a mist of heavy water and fights to rise, and back we come the long, long distance around that mountain of a snout, past and past the yawning great arch of the open mouth, to the eye on the other side.

It must be only now that the mighty mass of dim-nerved flesh feels the pain of his dazzle-tattered eye. Something unspeakable moves inside the arch, and a gout of water and ichor shoots skyward. I see it rise, I see it curl; our wings will not survive this,

so "*Gee!*" I cry, the sum total of terror and self-hate, of love for the hippogriff and the enchantment of Angelica; of anger, regret, remorse. His response is instant and beyond his control, and he wheels shoreward as I stand on the saddle, fall toward the monster, and kick back at that purple flank with both legs and all my strength. Even as I fall I look back under one arm, for a flash of Angelica's body and the sight of my hippogriff flailing down into the water, short of the shore line. One wet wing-elbow rises like a sail and sinks as slowly; his neck, so pathetically thin without the dry golden ruff of feathers, is stretched toward the rock, but not far enough: he has died for me, and his laughter is dead with him; does thee know now, fool knight, what it was he told thee with that touch of his beak? Only that for all his jibes and hurtful scorn, he was ready to die with thee ... And dying, Rogero, thy steed could not know thee heard, or would ever understand.

All this, in the instant of catapult, stretched achingly from my kick, with speed my only wings, my brain racing and my heart wrenched; and before me the magic shield of Atlantes. The shield strikes the water first, and my arrowing body slips under the thundering waterspout as it descends. Like a flat stone the shield skips on its curved face, and my forehead rings it like a gong. It tries to skip again, but my body plops in stingingly at the same instant, and stays it.

And at last I squat in the corner of that beastly smile, and all the hate I have ever known pours out of my arms and into the flailing of the shield. Edge and edge, flat and edge again, I belabor that viscid mound just back of my perch. It yields slowly, and at first I must work with my face but an arrow-length away; I feel it is burning me, filling me with a brutal and primitive madness that surely must turn my brain into what one finds in a dryrotted chestnut. But then it ceases to be, and is no more, and surely no less horrid than any part of the beast.

How long this pounding? I know not ... but at length pain reaches it, and a convulsion such as should be impossible to anything so ponderous. My handhold disappears; there is a moment of strangling and a moment of crushing weight, a blow precisely where, earlier, my forehead struck the shield. And then I am thrashing in shallows on black rock, my legs tangled with the limp neck of the hippogriff.

The anchor of the Princess's leg-shackle grinds my small ribs; I shift away from it, clutch it between arm and side, and lock my legs about the neck of the hippogriff, lest his body be swept out to sea. Water runs and runs, tugs and cascades off the rock, and for a long time my sky is full of black specks shifting and twinkling. But I will not let go.

When the tugging stops, I raise my head. The water is back to something like normal. More than half the hippogriff's body is aground. The rock is completely free of litter—the last cascade having swept it clear. Out at sea stands a new mountain: I think it is dead now. It is sinking, ever so slowly, or sliding down some age-old chute it has worn in the ocean floor.

“Rogero—”

I kick free of the hippogriff's heavy neck and head, and crawl to her.

“Princess!”

“Thou art bravest of knights.”

“Nay, Angelica,” I mumble. “I am neither brave, nor a knight. I must free thee.”

“A simple matter.”

“Ay, had I his strength,” and I nod to the dead hippogriff.

“Mourn him not, Rogero,” says the Princess. “Thee stayed by him as he died, and thee will be rewarded.”

“Then must we wait on another hippogriff to strike thy chains?”

“No. The ring, Rogero; take off the ring.”

I stumble up the slope to her shackled hand, and take the ring, while she says, “It is a greater amulet, possibly, than thee knows. I was seeking it when I was shipwrecked here; I never thought to see it again; to have it brought to me makes thee part of a miracle.”

“See it again? It is thine?”

“It was stolen from my treasure house long ago, and has been on many hands. Its last use, so I was told in the north, was to be by a maiden who wished to free some dolt stupid enough to be entrapped by a magician and too stupid to break free. How came thee by it?”

“It was ... cast aside as worthless.” My ears burn. “Princess, I must free thee.”

In her chains, she stretches lazily. “Whenever we like. These

bonds mean nothing. Rogero, I am in thy debt."

"No, Princess, for I have seen thee. It is enough."

"Prettily said, and I believe thee." And it seems she is amused. "Then do as I ask, and thee shall see a new power of the ring. Put the ring in my mouth."

I held it to her parted lips. "Thou art a sweet and somewhat slow-witted man," she whispers. "Goodbye, Rogero." She takes the ring.

The shackles lie empty, and I crouch there over the black rock which pillowed her, my one hand extended, my mind awl at the nearness....

Nearness? She is gone!

Ah, she might have told me of this magic before demonstrating it! Is the world and all its magics leagued against me? Has the universe itself been designed to make me out a fool? "Thou art a sweet and somewhat slow-witted man." *Aiee!* I shall have that carved on my tomb!

Slowly I mount the rock, and face the rocky spine leading to the mainland, to and through the barbarians; through mountains and hunger and poverty and illness; to aid and be aided along the way, until at last I have won what was given me and what, unearned, was cast aside; afoot, acrawl—to my destiny.

"Are you quite all right, sir?"

Now that, old Dean-head, is a question. The music is surf and feathers in all its upbeats, strictly society on the down: scherzophrenic. A hot, transparent, blue flame whuffs out, and suddenly that is a matter of supreme importance, though I can't think why. Slowly I look up at him. "Me?"

"It seemed for a second or two that you weren't quite—with us, sir."

"A second or two," I say, "that's all it takes." Now I remember: that blue flame on the jubilee tray is the one I was looking at when I went under, or other, or wherever Rogero keeps his world. Surely I know where that is! I look up again. Deans read books. "Listen, what do you know about Atlantes?"

"Atlantis, sir?" This guy, you couldn't ruffle him with a williwaw. "As I recall, it sank under the sea."

"No, Atlantes—a magician."

"Ah. I believe there was a necromancer of that name in Ariosto,

somewhere.”

I put an accurate forefinger on his second stud and push it triumphantly. “*Orlando Furioso!* So *that’s* it! Hey, do you remember what ever happened to Bradamante?”

He puts his hands behind his back and looks at the wall meeting the ceiling. Good head on that man; splendid. “As I remember, sir, she married a knight—”

“Ex-knight,” I say, and it hurts. “Also, good night.” I give him a whole heap of money and head out.

“Good night, sir,” says the doorman.

“Oh,” I say, “You. Hey, a girl about so high and so wide with a silver streak in her hair, she left here. How long ago?”

He says he doesn’t recall so I give him some money. “About four minutes,” he says. “That way,” and points.

“Only four?” I have something in me like a pain. “That way, you’re sure?”

“You should be able to catch her,” he says. He closes his eyes and smiles. “Pretty.”

“The Grand Canyon,” I say, “it’s cute too.” I run the way he points. It’s to the river.

So it’s *Orlando* all this time, I think, and something has kept me from recognizing it. Atlantes and Bradamante, Angelica, princess of Cathay, the hippogriff and the Orc, all there. And what am I doing, acting it out? Atlantes kept Rogero from being a knight; some sort of magic keeps me from being a painter. Only nowadays they call it a neurosis.

So where am I going in such a hurry?

Got to save the Princess from the Orc. Orc, variant of urp, a real nauseating beast. Better I should go right back to the studio and mind my own business. Yes, that’s what Rogero kept telling himself. And he landed by the Princess anyway, no matter how his hippogriff laughed. Well laugh then, hippogriff. You’re not long for this world anyway.

There she is!

Walk now. Get your wind. See what happens to her. She’s chained naked on no rock yet. Or maybe she is ... analogies being what they are ...

Now cut it out, Giles! You’re all right now. It’s all just a story you read and mooned over when you were a kid. There were others; but did you really live it up with “The Little Lame Prince”;

did you referee that go between the firedrake and the remora in Andrew Lang's book; did you feel the icicle pierce your heart in "Back of the North Wind"? So maybe your subconscious is trying to tell you something with Arisoto. Tell you what? To get religion? Or (and this is the idea that feels like pain) that you're no more a painter than Rogero is a knight, in the long run ... in spite of some initial successes?

Go home, go home, and paint the way Miss Brandt wants you to. Go home now and your hippogriff will love you for it; yes, and live, whatever that might mean.

But wait; Miss Brandt wants you to be a painter and Bradamante didn't want Rogero to be a knight. My story doesn't coincide with his; it just sort of resonates. All the more reason to get of here, Giles; go home. You've got all the money in the world; all the freedom, all the time to go anywhere and do anything. *Paint anything*. You know what happened to Rogero, his hippogriff, and his magic ring—yes, and his shield too, when he let his bumbling chivalry override his derisive conscience. (Conscience? Since when can a conscience be as beautiful as a hippogriff?)

So, go home. But look; look there, she has stopped at the River Road, and stands under a light, her gray silk gone all silver and the margins of her hair sinking a little over her slender shoulders as she raises her face to the sky. What is in that face? I can't see, I can't see ... an appeal, a submission rather; such sadness as hers is past hope and therefore past appealing to anything.

Princess, what is your rock, what your Orc? What comes, and you helpless; what shows itself without form, grows to fill the sky; what is impregnable, ironclad, and filthy, unspeakable? What fills your world and your short future, and proves at the same time that it shows only its slimy skull, and there is measurelessly more below?

You don't scream, Princess?

You are only calm; but I have seen your tears.

She crosses the road to the trees, and takes a path toward the water; so laugh, hippogriff. I'll go to her.

But she's gone in the shadows: hurry, hurry—

And there in a quiet place I come on her and, like Rogero on the black rock, I sip the vision; for to gulp it would be more than I could bear.

There is a hole in the grove, an empty place by the water to let the night in. Part of a moon floats a train across the water to her as she sinks to a bench. Her head turns and tilts a little, as if to a footfall (does she hear me? Does she know there is more than her sadness in the world?) and she is completely in silhouette except for the single beam cupping a cheekbone, and the silver streak in her hair; with that small shard of cold white, the path on the water has a part of a moon at each end!

And still more, just a little, her head turns, so her perfect profile lies in liquid moon; and now, if she turns only her eyes, she may see me. She does.

"I knew you'd be around." Her voice ... a bell, a bird, a sound-unlike-sound ... no. A voice, just a voice. Think about that, Giles; but not now.

"May I ... I mean ..."

"Sure," she says, indicating the bench. "Why not?"

I sit timidly at the other end of the bench, watching her as she stares out over the water. Her eyes are hooded and her face a chalice of sadness, brimming. And suddenly I know her Orc.

Poverty can be the Orc. Poverty can be the monster visible and nearing, which comes slimy and stinking out of the pit to fill the sky and yet be showing only its smallest part. Poverty can come to one chained, disregard one's station and one's virtues, and take one at its leisure.

Then I might be Rogero yet, for there is money in my pocket, neat, obedient, omnipotent money. Should I challenge her monster?

She might be angry. (Angelica? Angry? No; she bade the knight leave her and save himself.)

I look at her, and the sadness in her is greater than the money in my pocket. I see abruptly that my gesture would not anger her after all. She would simply pity me. My effort would be lost in her great need.

Then I'll share what I have. Half what I have is still, effectively, all the money there is.

She is looking at the moon, so distant and so dead; she has the mark of distance and death upon her. Rogero offered no part of himself to his princess; he offered it all.

All of it? I touch the lapel of the most expensive suit I have ever owned; good new money whispers under my hand of miles

and years of color and startlement, tastes and textures and toys; all the things, the thrills I've never had because it took too much time to just be Giles.

"I wish you wouldn't stare like that."

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "Sorry."

"What's on your mind?"

Only that when tomorrow's sun comes to you, you might give back to it as much gladness as a daffodil. Just that by giving you all I ever owned, so new that my own hands have not touched it, you might never be afraid again. "Just that I'd like to ... borrow your pen."

"My—well, I suppose." She has it in her handbag; finds it and gives it to me.

I take my elegant, one and final blue book, and crouching close in the moonlight, *Giles*, I write, *Giles*, and *Giles*, and *Giles*, until I've written on the bottom line of every perforated page.

I hold it out to her with the pen. Here (I would say, but I cannot speak) here is all the magic I own, since I lost my shield. Here are my hooves and my talons. Here are my wings.

"What's this?"

"Yours," I croak. "I don't want it. Any of it."

"God," she says.

She rises like the lily—but now, in the moonlight, more like a cereus—and looks at me. "You're sure, now."

"Never more sure."

"I thought," she says, "that you'd turn out to be a lot more fun than this." And she throws the book into the river.

I sit in a dream by the corpse of a dream. It grows cold. Loneliness lives in my very pores as sadness lives in her face. She is gone, the moon is gone, and something else has gone, too. I do not know its name but it once kept me warm.

When she left, her leaving a completion of the absent gesture of throwing the book, I said nothing and I did not move; I am not sure that I really saw her leave.

Rogero, I think, I need you. I wish I could have a word with you.

For when you were stripped and alone, somewhere in yourself you found a way to travel, through wild countries, through poverty and sickness and hardship, certain that they would refine you for your destiny. You see, dear doppelgänger, the twentieth-century

man has no destiny; at least, he has no magicians to read it off for him, so he can never quite be sure. But take his amulets away, his spells and cantrips graven with the faces of dead presidents—and he'll look over no mountains toward an unshakable faith. He'll stare at nothing but his own terror.

Rogero, the universe is indeed leagued together to make fools of us.

I leave the bench and the river, not to be a pilgrim, but just to take my misery to familiar surroundings and wrap it up in weariness. And tomorrow I shall wake with the comfort—if such it is—that I am Giles and will continue to be Giles without the intrusion of Signor Ariosto's parables. It had better be a comfort; I may even turn my staring white canvas to the wall, now that I think of it; I wouldn't be able to bring myself to touch it.

So I walk and I walk. And then up the long steps and down the long hall, fling open the door which unveils the dirty—

But it isn't a dirty bed, and I have one mad moment of childish panic; I have burst into the wrong place; and then I see the easel, the bright clean easel, and I know I am home.

"I hope you don't mind; the door was open, and I thought ... so to keep myself busy while I waited, I—" She makes a smile, and tries harder and makes another, but smiles over hands which rapidly clasp and unclasp are unconvincing. "I'll go," says Miss Brandt, "but I wanted to tell you I think you did a splendid thing."

I look at the clean, shelved dishes and the drum-tight bedclothes, and my paints and brushes sensibly left untouched. But what impresses me is the unthinkable statement that I have done a splendid thing. I sit on the bed and look at her.

"How did you ever find out?" she asks. "You weren't to know, ever."

"I know a lot now," I tell her. "What specially do you mean?"

"About the money. Giving it back."

"I gave it away," I admit. And, because it's the truth, "I don't call that so splendid."

"It was, if ..." And then, as if she's had the question held down tight and can't control it any longer, she flashes a glance at the easel, and asks, "Does it mean you'll paint again?"

My eye follows hers and I shudder. She turns pale as the new light at the window. "Oh," she says in a very small voice. "I—

guess I've done the wrong thing." She snatches up a shiny black pocketbook and runs to the door. But there's a Giles standing there first, who pushes her back hard so she sits down—*plump!*—on the bed.

I am tired and hurt and disappointed and I want no more wonderments. "You tell me all the things you've done, wrong and otherwise, right from the beginning."

"Oh, how it began. Well, I'm her secretary, you know, and we had a sort of quarrel about you. She's a mean, small, stupid sort of person, Giles, for all her money and the way she looks—she is lovely, isn't she? In case you want to know (everybody does) that streak of silver is real. Anyway, I—"

"You're *her* secretary?"

"Yes. Well I got so terribly distressed about—" She waves at the easel again, and the miraculous lashes point away, "—you, you know, that I suppose I got on her nerves. She said some mean things about you and I sort of blew up. I said if I had her money I'd see to it that you started painting again."

"Just like that."

"I'm sorry. It was—so important; I couldn't bear to have you just—"

"Go on with the story."

"She said if I had her money and tried to use it that way I'd just make a fool of myself. Well, maybe she was right, but ... it went like that until she swore at me and said if I was so positive, go ahead. Take all the money I wanted and just see how far I'd get." All the while she talks she is pleading, underneath. I don't listen to that part of it. "So I came here yesterday and I was to phone her the way you sign your name, and she would call the bank and fix it up."

"Nice of her."

"No, it wasn't. She did it because she thought it would be amusing. She has so much money that it wouldn't cost her anything. Anything she'd notice. And then you found out about it, I don't know how, and gave her the checkbook. When she came back last night she was wild. It wasn't half the fun she thought. All you did was to be amusing in a restaurant for a couple of hours. Please don't look at me like that. I just did what I could. I—had to. Please—I had to."

I keep on looking at her, thinking. Finally, "Miss Brandt, you

said a thing yesterday—my God, was it only yesterday?—about my not being able to paint now because I don't know why I painted before. Do you know what you were talking about?"

"I—" and the lashes go down, the hands busy themselves, "—I only know sort of generally. I mean, if you can do a thing and know how you do it and—and especially *why*, and then something stops you, I think it's easy to see the thing that stops you."

So I lean against the door and look at her in the way that makes her squirm (I'm sorry but that's the way I look when I'm thinking) and I think:

Does anyone ask a painter—even the painter himself—*why* he paints? Now me, I painted ... used to ... whatever I saw that was beautiful. It had to be beautiful to me, through and through, before I would paint it. And I used to be a pretty simple fellow, and found many completely beautiful things to paint.

But the older you get the fewer completely beautiful things you see. Every flower has a brown spot somewhere, and a hippogriff has evil laughter. So at some point in his development an artist has to paint, not what he sees (which is what I've always done) but the beauty in what he sees. Most painters, I think, cross this line early; I'm crossing it late.

And the simple—child?—artist paints for himself ... but when he grows up he sees through the eyes of the beholder, and feels through his fingertips, and helps him to see that which the artist is gifted to see. Those who had wept over my work up to now, I used to say, had stolen meaning out of it, against my will. When I grow up, perhaps they will accept what I willingly give them. And because Miss Brandt feels this is worth giving, she has tried to get more of it for people.

So I had stopped painting because I had become too discerning, and could find nothing perfect enough to paint. But now it occurs to me that the girl with the silver in her hair can be painted for the beauty she has, regardless of her other ugliness. Atlantes had a magic, and in it one walked the battlements of a bastion—which was only, in truth, a byre. Miss Brandt can paint me, in her mind, as a man who turned back all the money in the world, and for her, this is a real nobility.

The only key to the complexity of living is to understand that this world contains two-and-a-half-billion worlds, each built in a

person's eyes and all different, and all susceptible to beauty and hungry for it.

I ran out of things to paint ... and now, now, there'll never be enough time to paint beauty! Rogero did a knightly thing on the black rock, because he was not a good knight. I did a manly thing about the money because I was a fool. All successes are accidents in someone's world ... so: "You tell her it worked, Miss Brandt. I'm going to paint, Miss Brandt; I'm going to paint *you*, Miss Brandt, because you're beautiful."

And I paint, and she is, because I paint, because she is.

When You're Smiling

Never tell the truth to humans.

I can't recall having formulated that precept; I do know I've lived under it all my life.

But *Henry*?

It couldn't matter with Henry.

You might say Henry didn't count.

And who would blame me? Being me, I'd found, was a lonely job. Doing better things than other people—and doing them better to boot—is its own reward, up to a point. But to find out about those murders, those dozens and dozens of beautiful scot-free murders, and then not to be able to tell anyone ... well, I act like a human being in so many other ways—

And besides, it's only Henry.

When I was a kid in school, I had three miles to go and used roller skates except when it was snowing. Sometimes it got pretty cold, occasionally too hot, and often wet; but rain or shine, Henry was there when I got to the building. That was twenty years ago, but all I have to do is close my eyes to bring it all back, him and his homely, doggy face, his odd flexible mouth atwist with laughter and welcome. He'd take my books and set them by the wall and rub one of my hands between his two if it was cold, or toss me a locker-room towel if it was wet or very hot.

I never could figure out why he did it. It was more than just plain hero-worship, yet Lord knows he got little enough from me.

That went on for years, until he graduated. I didn't do so well and it took me longer to get out. I don't think I really tried to graduate until after Henry did; the school suddenly seemed pretty bleak, so I did some work and got clear of it.

After that, I kicked around a whole lot looking for a regular income without specializing in anything, and found it writing features for the Sunday supplement of one of those newspapers whose editorial policies are abhorrent to decent people, but it's all right; no decent person reads them.

I write about floods, convincingly describing America's certain watery grave, and I write about drought and the vanishing water table, visualizing our grandchildren expiring on barren plains that are as dry as a potato-chip. Then there's the perennial collision with a wandering planet, and features about nuts who predict the end of the world, and biographies of great patriots cut to size so they won't conflict with the editorial page. It's a living, and when you can compartment it away from what you think, none of it bothers you.

So a lot of things happened and twenty years went by, and all of a sudden I ran into Henry.

The first thing about him was that he hadn't changed. I don't think he had even grown much. He still had the coarse hair and the ugly wide mouth and the hot happy eyes. The second funny thing was the way he was dressed, like always, in hand-me-downs: a collar four sizes too large, a baggy suit, a raveled sweater that would have fought bitterly with his old herringbone if both weren't so faded.

He came wagging and panting up to me this early fall day when everyone in sight but Henry was already wearing a topcoat. I knew him right away and I couldn't help myself; I just stood there and laughed at him. He laughed, too, glad to the groveling point, not caring why I was laughing, but simply welcoming laughter for its own sake. He said my name indistinctly, again and again; Henry almost always spoke indistinctly because of that grin he wore half around his head.

"Well, come on!" I bellowed at him, and then cussed at him. It always made him wince, and it did now. "I'll buy you a drink. I'll buy you nine drinks!"

"No," he said, smiling, backing away a little, bobbing his head in that funny way, as if he was about to duck. "I can't right now."

It seemed to me he was looking at my sharp-creased dacron suit, or maybe the pearl homburg. Or maybe he just caught my eye on his old set of threads. He wagged his hands aimlessly in front of him, like an old woman caught naked and not knowing what to cover up. "I don't drink."

"You'll drink," I said.

I took him by the wrist and marched him down to the corner and into Molson's, while he tugged ineffectually at me and mumbled things from between his solid, crooked teeth. I wanted

a drink and I needed a laugh, right *now*, and I wasn't going to drag all the way down to Skid Row just to keep him from feeling conspicuous.

Somebody was sitting in a back booth—someone I especially didn't want to see. Be seen by. I don't think I broke stride when I saw her, though. Hell, the day won't come when I can't handle the likes of her ...

"Siddown," I said, and Henry had to; I pushed him and the edge of the seat hit the backs of his knees. I sat down, too, giving him the hip hard enough to slide those worn old tweeds of his back into the corner where he wouldn't be able to get out unless I moved first. "Steve!" I roared, just as though I didn't care if anyone in the place knew I was there. Steve was on his way, but I always yelled like that; it bothered him. Steve's also sort of a funny guy.

"Awright, awright," he complained. "What'll you have?"

"What are you drinking, Henry?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing for me."

I snorted at him and said to Steve, "Two sour-mash an' soda on the side."

Steve grunted and went away.

"Really," Henry said, with his maybe-I-better-duck wobble, "I don't want any. I don't drink."

"Yes, you do," I told him. "Now what's with you? Come on, right from the beginning. From school. I want the story of your life—trials and triumphs, toils 'n' tragedies."

"My life?" he asked, and I think he was genuinely puzzled. "Oh, I haven't done anything. I work in a store," he added. When I just sat there shaking my head at him, he looked down at his hands and pulled them abruptly down into his lap as if he was ashamed of his nails. "I know, I know, it's nothing much." He looked at me with that peculiar hot gaze. "Not like you, with a piece in the paper every week and all."

"Steve came with the bourbon. I shut up until he'd gone. With Steve, I like to pretend I have big business and don't trust him to listen in. I swear sometimes you can hear him grinding his teeth. He never says anything, though. A good customer's got just a little more rights than just anybody else, so there's nothing he can do about it. He just works there.

When he'd gone, I said, "Here's to the twist that don't exist, and her claim there's a game that can't be played. Here's to the wise old lies we use—"

"Honest, I don't want any," said Henry.

"If I'm going to be hospitable, you're going to be housebroke," I told him, and picked up his glass and shoved it at his face.

He got his lips on it just in time to keep it from falling into that oversize collar. He didn't take but a sip, and that great big mouth snapped down to button-size as if it had a drawstring on it. His eyes got round and filled with tears; he tried to hold the liquor on his tongue, but he sneezed through his nostrils and swallowed and started to cough.

Laugh? I got my breath back just this side of hernia. Some day I'll plant a sound camera and do that again and make an immortal out of old Henry.

"Gosh!" he gasped when he could.

He wiped his eyes with his frayed sleeves. I guess he didn't have a handkerchief. "That *hurt*." But he was grinning the old grin all the same. "You drink that all the time?" he half whispered.

"All the time, like so," I said, and drank the rest of his, "And like so," and drank mine down. "Steve!" Steve already had the refills on a tray and I knew it, which is why I yelled at him. "Now, about what you started to say—" and I broke off while Steve got to the table and put down the drinks and picked up the empties and went away again—"the story of your life. You sit there and tell me 'Oh, nothing,' and you say you work in a store, period. Now *I* am going to tell *you* the story of your life. First of all, I'm going to tell you who you are. You're Henry. Nobody else in God's great gray-green Universe was ever this particular Henry. We start with that. No—"

Henry said, "But I—"

"No mountain," I went on, "no supernova, no collapsing, alpha-spitting nucleus was ever more remarkable than the simple fact of you, Henry, just being Henry. Name me an earthquake, an oak tree, a racehorse or a Ph.D. thesis and I will, by God, name you one just like it that happened before. You," I said, leaning forward and jamming my forefinger into his collarbone, "you, Henry, are unique and unprecedented on this planet in this galaxy."

"No, I'm not," he laughed, backing off from the finger, which did him no good once I had him pinned to the wall behind him.

"No supernova," I said again, having just discovered that the phrase is a delightful way of sending the flavor of good bourbon through the nostrils. "That's what we only begin with," I went on. "Just being, you're a miracle, aside from everything you've ever said or done or dreamed about." I took away the finger and sat back to beam at him.

"Ah," he said; I swear he blushed. "Ah, there's plenty more like me."

"Not a single one." I tipped up my glass, found it was empty already, so I drank his because I had my mouth all set for it. "Steve!" I sat silently watching Henry aimlessly rubbing his collarbone while the drinks arrived and the empties left. "So we start with a miracle. Where do we go from there? How do you cap that?"

He made a sort of giggle. It meant, "I don't know."

"You never heard anybody talk like this about you before, did you?"

"No."

"All right." I put out the forefinger again, but did not touch him with it because he expected I would.

Over his shoulder, in the wall mirror, I could see that woman sitting alone in the back booth, crying. Always a great one for crying, she was.

"I'll tell you why I talk like this, Henry," I said. "It's for your own good, because you don't know what you are. Here you walk around this place telling people 'Oh, nothing' when they ask for the story of your life, and you're a walking miracle just to start with. Now what do we go on with?"

He shrugged.

"You feel better, now you know what you are?"

"I don't ... I never thought about it." He looked up at me swiftly, as if to find out what I wanted him to say. "I guess I do."

"All right then. That makes it better. That makes it easier on you, because I am now going to tell you what you are, Henry. Henry, what are you?"

"Well, you said—" he swallowed—"a miracle."

I brought down my fist with a bang that made everybody jump,

even her in the mirror, but especially Henry. “No! I’ll tell you what you are. You are a nowhere type, a *nudnick* type *nothing!*” I quickly bent forward. He shrank from the finger like a snail from salt. “And now you’re going to tell me that’s a paradox. You’re going to say I contradicted myself.”

“I’m not.” His mouth trembled and then he was smiling again.

“Well, all right, but it’s what you’re thinking. Drink up.” I raised my glass. “Here’s to the eyes, blue brown and brindle, and here’s to the fires that those eyes don’t kindle; I don’t mean the fires that burn down shanties, I mean the fires that pull down—”

“Gee, no, thanks,” he said.

I drank my drink. “But I mean,” I said aloud to myself, “really a nothing.” I took his drink and held it and glared at him. “You will, by God, stop stepping on my punchlines.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t even notice.” He pointed vaguely. “I didn’t know anyone could handle so much of that—that whiskey.”

“I got news for you, boy,” I said, and winked at him. “Here it is past quitting time and this whiskey is all I had for lunch, and it’s what I had for a snack—high tea, wot?—and it’s what I’m having for dinner, and well should you envy this mighty capacity. Among other things. Now I will show you why I have uttered no paradox in describing you as a miracle and a simultaneous, coexistent, concurrent nothing.

I smelled his drink and lowered it. “You started out being everything I described—unique, unprecedented. If you thought about it at all, which I doubt, you thought of yourself as having been born naked and defenseless, and having gained constantly since—the power of speech, the ability to read, an education of sorts (you can see by my calling it that I’m in a generous mood) and, lately, some sort of a job in some sort of a store, the right to vote, and that ... well, unusual suit you’re wearing. No matter how modest you are about these achievements—are you are, you really are—they seem to add up to more than you started with.

“Well, they don’t. Since the day you were born, you’ve lost. What the hell is it that you keep looking at?”

“That girl. She’s crying. But I’m listening to what you’re saying.”

“You better listen. I’m doing this for you, for your own good. Just let her cry. If she cries long enough, she’ll find out crying

doesn't help. Then she'll quit."

"You know why she's crying?"

Did I! "Yes, and it's a pretty useless procedure. Where was I?"

"I've been losing since I was born," Henry obediently reminded me.

"Yeah, yeah. What you've lost is potential, Henry. You started out with the capability of doing almost anything and you've come to a point where you can do almost nothing. On the other hand, I started out being able to do practically nothing and now I can do almost anything."

"That's wonderful!" he said warmly.

"You just don't know," I told him. "Now, mind you, we're still talking about you. You'll see the connection. I just want to illustrate a point ... These days, everybody specializes or doesn't make it, one or the other. If you're lucky enough to have a talent and find work where you use it, you go far. If your work is outside your talent, you can still make out. If you have no talent, hard work in one single line makes for a pretty fair substitute. But in each case, how good you are depends on how closely you specialize and how hard you work inside a specialty. Me, now, I'm different. *Steve!*"

"None for me," Henry insisted plaintively.

"Do it again, Steve. Henry, stop interrupting me when I'm doing you a favor. What *I* am, I'm what you might call a specializing non-specialist. We're few and far between, Henry—guys like me, I mean. Far as work's concerned, I got a big bright red light in here—" I tapped my forehead—"that lights up if I accidentally stay in one line too long. Any time that happens, I quick wind up what I'm doing and go do something else instead. And far as talents are concerned, talents I got, I guess. Only I don't use 'em. I avoid 'em. They're the only thing that could ever trap me into specializing and I just won't be trapped, not by anybody or anything. Not me!"

"You have a real talent for writing," Henry said diffidently.

"Well, thanks, Henry, but you're wrong. Writing isn't a talent. It's a skill. Certain kinds of thinking, ways of thinking—you might call them based on talent; but writing's just a verbalization, a knack of putting into an accepted code what's already there in your head. Learning to write is like learning to type, a

transformation of a sort of energy into a symbol. It's what you write that counts, not how you do it. What's the matter, did I lose you?"

He was looking out into the room over my shoulder and smiling. "She's still crying."

"Forget it. Every day, women lose their husbands. They get over it."

"Lose—Her husband's dead?"

"Altogether."

He looked again and I watched his wide mouth, the show of strong, uneven teeth. I couldn't blame him. She's a very unusual-looking girl and here the coast was clear. I wondered next what you'd ever say to Henry so he wouldn't smile.

Then he was looking at me again. "You were talking about your writing," he said.

"Oh. Now suppose, Henry, you had the assignment to write a piece every week and you wrote every single piece so the man who reads it believes it. And suppose one piece says: 'The world will end.' And another one says: 'The world will not end.' One says: 'No man is good. He can only struggle against his natural evil.' And another says, 'No amount of evil can alter the basic goodness of human beings.' See what I mean? Yet every single word of every piece comes out like a revelation. The whole series just stinks of truth. Would you say that you, the writer of all of this crud, believes or does not believe in what he writes?"

"Well, I guess ... I don't know. I mean I—" He looked into my eyes swiftly, trying again to discover what I wanted him to say. "Well," he said clumsily, when I just sat and wouldn't help, "if you, I mean I, writing that way, if I said white was white and then it was blue ... well, I guess I couldn't believe 'em both?" His voice put the question mark shyly at the end and he pretended to duck.

"You mean to say that kind of writer doesn't believe anything he writes. Well, I knew you were going to say that, and you're one hundred and three per cent *wrong*." And I leaned forward and glared at him.

He looked into his lap. "I'm sorry." Then, "He believes some of it?"

"No!"

“Oh,” Henry said. Miserably, he moved his glass an inch to the left. I took it away from him.

I said, “A writer like that learns to believe *everything* he writes about. Sure, white is white. But look: go down as far as you can into the microscopic, and still down, and what do you find? Measurements that can only be approximated; particles that aren’t particles at all, but only places where there is the greatest probability of an electric charge ... in other words, an area where nothing is fact, where nothing behaves according to the rules we set up for the proper behavior of facts.

“Now go up in the other direction, out into space, farther than our biggest telescopes can reach, and what do you find? Same thing! The incommensurable, the area of possibility and probability, where the theoretical computation (that’s scientese for ‘wild guess’) is acceptable mathematics. So okay: all these years, we’ve been living as if white was white and a neat a plus b equals a respectable c .

“There might be an excuse for that before we knew that in the microcosm and in the macrocosm all the micrometers are made of rubber and the tape-measures are printed on wet macaroni. But we do know that now; so by what right do we assume that everything’s vague up there and muzzy down yonder, but everything *here* is all neat as a pin and dusted every day? I maintain that nothing is altogether anything; that nothing proves anything, nothing follows from anything; nothing is really real, and that the idea we live in a tidy filling of a mixed-up sandwich is a delusion.

“But you can’t go around not believing in reality and at the same time do your work and get your pay. So the only alternative is to believe *everything* you run into, everything you hear, and especially everything you think.”

Henry said, “But I—”

“Shut up. Now, belief—faith, if you like—is a peculiar thing. Knowledge helps it along, but at the same time it can only exist in the presence of ignorance. I hold as an axiom that complete—*really* complete—information on any given subject would destroy belief in it. It’s only the gaps between the steppingstones of logic that leave room for the kind of ignorance called intuition, without which the mind can’t move. So back we come to where

we started: by not specializing in anything. I am guarding my ignorance, and as long as I keep that ignorance at a certain critical level, I can say anything or hear anything and believe it. So living is a lot of fun and I have more fun than anybody."

Henry smiled broadly and shook his head in deep admiration. "I'm glad if it's so, I mean, you're happy."

"What do you mean, *if*? I get what I want, Henry; I always get what I want. If that isn't being happy, what is?"

"I wouldn't know." Henry closed his eyes a moment and then said again, "I wouldn't know ... Let me out, would you?"

"You going some place? I'm not through with you, Henry, me boy. I don't *begin* to be through with you."

He looked wistfully at the door and, without moving, seemed to sigh. Then he smiled again. "I just want to, uh, you know."

"Oh, that. The used beer department is down those steps over there." I got up and let him by. There was no way out of Molson's except past me; he wouldn't get away.

Why shouldn't he get away?

Because he made me feel good, that's why. There was something about Henry, a sort of hair-trigger dazzle effect, that was pretty engaging. Recite the alphabet to him and I swear he'd look dazzled. Not that the line I'd been slinging wouldn't dazzle anyone.

It was just then I decided to tell him about the murderer.

The room tilted suddenly and I hung on to the edges of the table and stopped it. I recognized the symptom. Better get something to eat before soaking up any more of that sour-mash. I didn't want to get offensive.

Just then I felt, rather than heard, a sort of commotion. I looked up. Henry, that damn fool, was leaning with his palms of the table where what's-her-name sat, the one who cried all the time. I saw her glance up and then her face went all twisted. She sprang up and fetched him one across the chops that half spun him around. Next thing you know, she was through the door, with Henry staring after her and grinning and slowly rubbing his face.

"Henry!"

Turning my way, Henry looked again at the door, then came shambling over.

"Henry, you ol' wolf, you've been holding out on me," I said. "Since when have you been chasing tomatoes?"

He just sat down heavily and fondled his cheek. "Gosh!"

"Whyn't you tell me you wanted to make a pass? I'd have saved you the trouble. She won't be good for anything for weeks yet. She can't think of anything but—"

"It wasn't anything like that. I just asked her if there was anything I could do. She didn't seem to hear me, so I asked her again. Then she got mad and hit me. That's all."

I laughed at him. "Well, you probably did her a favor. She's better off mad at something than sitting there tearing herself apart. What made you think you could get to first base with her, anyway?"

He grinned and shook his head. "I told you, honest I didn't want anything, only to see if I could help." He shrugged. "She was crying," he said, as if that explained something.

"So what's in it for you?"

He shook his head.

"I thought so!" I banged him on the shoulder. "That's where we'll start, Henry. We're going to make you over, that's what we're going to do. We're going to get you out of oversize second-hand shirts and undersize Boy Scouts ideas. We're going to find out what you really want and then we're going to see that you learn how to get it."

"But I'm all—I mean I don't really—"

"Shut up! And the first and rock-bottom basic and important thing you'll learn till you're blue in the face is, never do nothing for nothing. In other words, always ask 'What's in it for me?' and do nothing about anything until the answer comes up 'Plenty!' *Steve! The check!* That way you'll always have a new wallet to put in your new suit and nobody, especially girls, is going to clobber you in a filthy joint like this."

Actually it wasn't a filthy joint, but Steve came up just then and I wanted him to hear me say it. I gave him what the check said, to the penny, and told him to keep the change. Once in a while I'd tip Steve—not often—and then I'd make it a twenty or better. What he didn't know was, if you total all the bills and all the tips, the tips came out to exactly nine per cent. Either he'd find that out for himself some day or I'd tell him; one way or the other, it would be fun. The secret of having fun is to pay

attention to the details.

Out on the street, Henry stopped and shuffled his feet. "Well, good-by."

"Good-by nothing. You're coming home with me."

"Oh," he said, "I can't. I got to—"

"You got to what? Come on now, Henry—whether you know it or not, you need help; whether you like it or not, you're going to get it. Didn't I say I was going to tear you down and make you over?"

He stepped to the right and he stepped to the left. "I can't be taking up your time. I'll go on home."

I suddenly saw that if I couldn't change his mind, the only way I'd get him to come along would be to carry him. I could do it, but I didn't feel like it. There's always a better way than hard work.

"Henry," I said, and paused.

He waited, not quite jittering, not exactly standing still. Guys like Henry, they can't fight and they can't run; you can do whatever you want with them.

So—think. Think of the right thing to say. I did, and I said it.

"Henry," I said, real sudden, real soft, sincere, and the change must have hit him harder than a yell, "I'm in terrible trouble and you're about the only man in the world I can trust."

"Gosh." He came a little closer and peered up at me in the thickening twilight. "Why didn't you say so?"

Sticking out of the marrow of his soul, every man has an eye-bolt. All you have to do is find it and drop your hook in. This was Henry's. I almost laughed, but I didn't. I turned away and sighed. "It's a long story ... but I shouldn't bother you with it. Maybe you'd better—"

"No. Oh, no. I'll come."

"You're a pal, Henry," I whispered, and swallowed as noisily as I could.

We walked down to the park and started across it. I walked slowly and kept my eyes on the middle distance, like a hired mourner, while Henry trotted alongside, looking anxiously up into my face every once in a while.

"Is it about that girl?" he asked after a while.

"No," I said. "She's no trouble."

"Her husband. What happened to him?"

"Same thing that happened to the ram who didn't see the ewe turn." I hit him with my elbow. "U-turn, get it? Anyway, he drove over a cliff." We were passing under a street light at the time and I saw Henry's face. "Some day you're going to split your head in two just by grinning. What do you go around showing your teeth for all the time, anyway?"

He said, "I'm sorry." And when we were almost through the park, "Why?"

"Why what?" I asked vacantly.

"The husband ... over the cliff."

"Oh. Well, she had a sort of a roll in the hay with somebody, and when she told him, he up and knocked himself off. Some people take themselves pretty seriously. Here we are." I led him up the walk and through the herculite doors. In the elevator, he gulped around at the satinwood paneling. "This is nice."

"Keeps the rain off," I said modestly. The doors slid open and I led the way down the hall and kicked open my door. "Come on in."

In we went and there, of course, stood Loretta with The Look on her face, the damned anger always expressed as hurt. So I pushed Henry ahead of me and watched The Look be replaced by tight Company Manners.

"My wife," I told Henry.

He stepped back and I pushed him forward again. He grinned and bobbed his head and wagged his figurative tail. "Huh-huh-huh—" he said, swallowed, and tried again. "Huh-how do?"

"It's Henry, my old school pal Henry that I told you about, Loretta." I'd never told her a thing. "He's hungry. I'm hungry. How's for some food?" Before she could answer, I asked, "A couple paper plates in the den would be less trouble than setting the table, hm?" and at this she must nod, so I shoved Henry toward the den and said, "Fine, and thanks, oh, best of good women," which made her nod a promise. We went in and I closed the double doors and leaned against them, laughing.

"Gosh," said Henry, his eyes heating up. "You never told me you had a—uh—were married." The smile flickered, then blazed.

"Guess I didn't. One of those things, Henry. The air you breathe, a post-nasal drip, the way you walk from here to the

office—same thing. Part of the picture. Why talk about it?”

“Yes, but maybe she ... maybe it’s trouble for her. Why are you laughing?”

I was laughing because of the change in Loretta’s face as we had come in. I was late and dinner was ruined, and I’d been drinking to boot; and primed as she was to parade hurt feelings all over the apartment, she hadn’t expected me to bring anyone home. Ah, Loretta; so mannered, so polite! She’d have died rather than show her feelings before a stranger, and to see her change from hostility to hospitality in three point five seconds was, to me, very funny. There’s always a way of getting out from under. All you have to do is think of it. In time.

“I’m laughing,” I told Henry, “at the idea of Loretta’s having trouble.”

“You mean I’m no bother?”

“I mean you make everything all right. Sit down.”

He did. “She’s pretty.”

“Wh—oh. Loretta. Yep, nothing but the best. Henry, I am a man different from all other men.”

He fumbled with some facial expressions and came up with a slow grinning puzzlement. “Isn’t everybody?” he asked timidly.

“Yes, you idiot. But by different, I mean *really* different. Not necessarily better,” I added modestly. “Just different.”

“How do you mean, different?” Good old Henry. What a straight man!

By way of answering him, I took out my key-case, zipped it open, thumbed out the flat brass key of my filing drawer and dangled it. “I’ll show you, soon as we have something in our stomachs and no interruptions.”

“Is this the ... the trouble you said you were in, you wanted my help?”

“It is, but it’s strictly private and confidential that I don’t want you even thinking about it until I can lock that door and go into detail.”

“Oh,” he said. “All right.” Visibly, he cast about for something else to talk about. “Can I ask you something about the girl who was ... whose husband ...”

“Fire away,” I said. “Not that it matters. You have the damndest knack, Henry, of combining the gruesome with the

trivial.”

“I’m sorry. She seemed so, well, sad. What was it you said, I don’t think I understood it?” His voice supplied the question mark to his odd phrasing. “She and somebody ...” His words trailed off and he went pink. “And her husband found out—”

“She sure did. And he didn’t exactly find out; she *told* him. She was mixed up in some research, see. Field-test of a new drug, a so-called hypnotic. So there she was, awake and aware and absolutely subject to any and all suggestions. And as you saw for yourself, she’s not a bad-looking chick, not bad at all. So nature just took its course. *Carpe diem*, as the Romans used to say, which means drill not and ye strike no oil.”

He looked at me foggily, but smiling broadly, too. “The researcher, the one who gave her the drug. But that wasn’t exactly her fault. I mean her husband didn’t have to—”

“Her husband did have to,” I mimicked, “being what he was. One of those idealistic, love-is-sacred characters, who, besides all of this, was sensitive about the side of his face he left in Korea. “Love,” I said, harpooning Henry’s collarbone with my finger again, “is cornflakes.”

I leaned back. “Besides, he had no way of knowing how it happened. This drug, it’s something like sodium amytal, though chemically unrelated. You know, ‘truth serum’! Only it doesn’t leave the subject groggy or doped. She went straight home, walking and talking just like always, and incapable of concealing what had happened. She didn’t even know she’d been—ah—medicated. It was in her coffee. All she could say was that such-and-such had happened to her and it was all so easy that, from now on, she could never know when it might happen again. He chewed on it for most of the night and then got up and got in his car and drove over the cliff.”

Henry smiled twice, one smile right on top of the other. “Now all she does is drink in bars?”

“She doesn’t drink. Ever read that William Irish book, *Phantom Lady*, Henry? There’s a girl in there who cracks a character just by haunting him—by being there, wherever he is, day and night, for weeks. This chick in the bar, in her goofed-off ineffectual way, is trying to do the same thing to me. She sits where I can see her and hates me. And cries.”

“You?”

I winked at him and made a *giddap* sort of cluck-cluck with my back teeth. “Research, Henry. A scientific project. It covers a multitude. And covering multitudes is a happy hobby, especially if you do it one by one. Sure, I know chemistry—told you I was a specializing non-specialist. Now wipe that grin off your face or you won’t be able to chew: here comes the food.”

Loretta carried in a tray. Butter-fried shrimp with piquant orange sauce, a mixed-greens salad with shallots and grated nuts, and an Arabian honey-cake.

“Oh!” gulped Henry, and bounced to his feet. “Oh, that’s just beautiful, Mrs.—”

“You didn’t bring a drink first, but I guess we can have it along with the food,” I said.

“I don’t really want any, really,” Henry said.

“He’s being polite. We don’t let our guests be polite, do we, Lorrie?”

For a moment, she had only one lip because she had sucked in the lower one to bite on. Then she said, “I’m sorry. I’ll mix—”

“Don’t mix,” I told her. “Bring the bottle. We wouldn’t think of troubling you any more, would we, Henry?”

“I really don’t want—”

“Right away, *darling*.” Two out of five times when I say *darling*, I roar at her. She set the tray down on the coffee table and fairly scurried out. I laughed. “Wonderful, wonderful. She doesn’t exactly hide the liquor, but she sure tidies it away. Now, by God, she’ll bring it to me.”

I could actually hear the soft sound at the corners of Henry’s mouth as his smile stretched it.

Loretta came back and I took the bottle. “No chaser; we’re *men* in here. Okay *darling*, you can leave the dishes here for the night.”

She wouldn’t back to the door and she wouldn’t—maybe she was frightened just then—she wouldn’t take her eyes off me, so she got out sidewise, not forgetting to flip the crumpled fragment of a hostess’s smile to Henry.

Henry was saying, “Well, thank you very much. Mrs.—” but by the time he got it all stammered out, I had the door closed.

I went to the settee, rubbing my hands. “Bring the bottle, Henry.”

He brought it, and sat down by me, and we ate. It was very good, which is the least a man can expect. I toyed with the idea of yelling for some tabasco, but I'd had enough fun with Loretta for the time being. Enveloping that food, my stomach felt well pleased with itself. Silent, unsmiling and intent, Henry absorbed what was on his plate.

I poured a slug for Henry, knowing I could afford to be generous, and one for myself. I leaned back and enjoyed a belch, which made Henry jump, threw down the bourbon, poured another and went to the desk.

On my desk is a typewriter, and under the typewriter is a sound-absorbing mat, and in the mat I keep a sewing-machine needle, the best toothpick Man ever made. It's strong and it's sharp and it has a base you can get a grip on without snapping it. I sat in the swivel chair and leaned my elbows on the typewriter and picked my teeth and watched Henry mopping the honey off his dessert plate with a piece of bread.

"That was—your wife certainly can—"

"Like I said, Henry, nothing but the best. Sit down over here. Bring your drink."

He hesitated, then brought it over and put it on the desk where I could reach it. He sat down on the edge of the easy chair. He looked like a worrisome kitten making its first try at sitting on a fence. I laughed in his face and he smiled right back at me.

"What I am going to do, Henry," I told him, I told average, stupid, fearful, dogface Henry, "I'm going to let you in on some things that no human being on Earth knows. I'm going to tell you at the same time that these things are known to a number of people. Not a large number, but—a number. Could both those statements be true?"

"Well, I—" he said. Then he blushed.

"You're sort of slow, so I'll keep it simple and easy for you. I just got off a paradox. But it isn't a paradox. Don't sit there and smile and shake your head at me. Just listen. You'll catch on. Now you and I—are we different from each other?"

"Oh, yes," he breathed.

"Right." At the same time, all human beings are alike. And you know what? No paradox there, either."

"No?"

“No. And here’s why. You’re like my wife and the bartender and my city editor and all the billions of creepers and crawlers on Earth who call themselves human beings. And as you just so perceptively pointed out, I’m not like you. And for your information, I’m not like Loretta or Steve or the city editor. Now do you see why there’s no paradox?”

Henry shifted unhappily. He absolutely astonished me. How could a guy like that, without bluff, without deftness, without, as far as I could see, even the ability to lie a little—how could he live three consecutive days in a world like this? Look at him, worrying away at my question, wanting so much to get the right answer.

It came like an abject apology: “No, I don’t see. No I don’t.” His eyes flickered, the embarrassed heat stirring and waning. “Unless what you mean is you’re not a human being.” He snickered weakly and again made that odd warding-off, half-ducking motion.

Leaning back, I beamed at him. “Now isn’t it a relief to know you’re not so dumb, after all?”

“Is that really what you mean? You’re not ... but I thought *everybody* was a human being!” he cried pathetically.

“Don’t get all churned up,” I told him gently.

I leaned forward very suddenly to startle him, and I did, too. I stuck my finger in my whiskey, lifted the glass with the other hand, and drew a wet circle on the desk-top, about eight inches in diameter.

“Let’s say, that anywhere in this circle—” I moved the glass around inside the mark—“this glass is what you call human. When it’s here or *here* or a little bit forward, it’s still human; it’s just not the same human—the same *kind* of human. You’re different from Steve the bartender because everything he is is here, and everything you are is over on the other side, *here*. You’re different because you’re placed differently in the circle, but you’re the same because you’re both inside it. Presto—no paradox.” I moved the glass far enough to empty it and set it aside and put my hand in the circle. The wet wood was bleaching slowly, which was okay; Loretta would polish it up in the morning.

“Inside the circle,” I said, “a man can be smart or stupid,

musical, aggressive, tall, effeminate, mechanically apt, Yugoslavian, a mathematical genius or a strudel baker—but he’s still human. Now by what Earthly conceit do we conclude that a man just *has* to live within that circle? What about a guy who’s born out here, on the outside edge? Why can’t he be here, right on the line? Who’s to say he can’t live way out here?” And I banged my hand down a foot away from the circle.

Henry said, “I—”

“Shut up. Answer: there *are* people outside this border. Not many, but some. And if you’re going to call the ones inside ‘human,’ the ones outside have to be—something else.”

“Is that what you are?” Henry whispered.

“That’s me.”

“Is that what they call a moot ... mute ...”

“Mutation? No! Well, damn it, yes; that’s a good a name as any. But not in the way you ever thought of. No atom-dust, no cosmic rays, nothing like that. Just normal everyday variation. Look, you have to go farther from one side of this circle to the other than from just inside to just outside—right? Yet the distance across is within the permissible variation; the difference between human beings which leaves them still human beings together. But one small variation this way—” I slid my finger outside the circle —“and you have something quite new.”

“How—new?”

I shrugged. “Any one of a zillion ways. Take any species. Take kittens from the same litter. You’ll find one has sharper claws, another has sharper eyes. Which is the best kitten?”

“Well, I guess the one with the—”

“No, you mumbling Neanderthal.” That made him smile. “Neither one is best. They’re just different, each in a way that makes him hunt a bit better. Now say another of the litter has functional gills and another has mat-scales like an armadillo. There’s your ...”

“Supercat?” he beamed.

“Just call it ‘uncat.’ ”

“You—you’re uh, un—”

“Unhuman.” I nodded.

“But you look—”

“Yeah, a cat with sweat-glands in its skin would look like a cat,

too—most of the time. I'm different, Henry. I've always known I was different." I poked my finger toward him and he curled from its imaginary touch. "You, for example—you have, like nobody else I ever met, that stuff called 'empathy.' "

"I have?"

"You're always feeling with other people's fingertips, seeing through other people's eyes. Laugh with 'em, cry with 'em. Empathy."

"Oh. Yes, I guess—"

"Now me, I have as much of that as my armadillo-cat has fur. It's just not in me. I have other things instead. Do you know I was never angry in my life? That's why I have so much fun. That's why I can push people around. I can make anybody do anything, just because I always have myself under control. I can roar like a lion and beat my fists on the wall and put up a hell of a show, yet always know exactly what I'm doing. You knew me when, Henry. You've read my stuff. You've seen me operate. You going to call a man like me human?"

He wet his lips, clasped his hands together, blankly made the knuckles crack. Poor Henry! A brand-new idea and it was splitting his skull-seams.

"Couldn't you be," he ventured at last, "just sort of—talented, not really different at all?"

"Ah! Now we come to the point. Now we get the big proof. Speaking of proof, where's the bottle? Oh, here." I poured. "See I'm a real modest boy, Henry. When I figured this all out, I didn't do the human thing—conclude that I was the only super—uh, unhuman in captivity. There's just too many people born, too much variation this way and that. Law of averages. There just *has* to be more like me."

"You mean just like—"

"No! I mean more unhumans—all kinds, any kind. So, because I can think like an unhuman, I thought my way after others of my kind."

Trying to heave up out of my chair, I quit and slumped back. "Damn it. You know, I'm hungry as a ... Imagine, a dinner like that. Why can't she cook up something that sticks to a man's ribs? I swear I'm as empty as a paper sack. Henry, check that door for me, see that it's locked."

He went to the door and tried it. It was locked. As he came back, I picked up the brass key. "This will open your eyes, Henry, old boy, old boy," I said.

I unlocked the file drawer. It got heavier all the time, I thought. Well, if you're going to have fun, you've got to take care of the details.

I lifted out the "Justice" file and banged it down beside the typewriter. "So I found me another unhuman. Takes one to catch one. Just you listen now and tell me what human being would even start this line of thinking, let alone carry it through." I opened the file.

"This all started," I said, "when I did a piece on unsolved murders. You know that no city releases figures on unsolved murders; well, not easily, anyway. You should see 'em—69 per cent in one city, 73 in another. Some bring it down to 40—our town got it to 38 per cent one year. But that's a whole lot of scot-free murderers, hm? All over the country. Imagine!

"So what I did—for the feature story, you know—I dug up everything I could find on a whole drawerful of these cases. What I wanted was an angle. What's the most obvious? Whodunit, that's what. So throw that out. What next? Who could have done it, but didn't. Throw that out, too.

"So then it occurred to me to see if there wasn't some sort of lowest common denominator to them—here a second-string advertising man with no enemies, there a teen-age hood with a knife in him, yonder a rich boy found floating next to his yacht—all kinds of people get murdered, you know.

"Mind you, I'm still just looking for an angle.

"Next, I threw out all the cases where people had a lot of enemies, and all the cases where a lot of people had an opportunity as well as a motive. This left a pretty strange stack. All of them were, apparently, reasonless, purposeless murders, all done differently at different places.

"Well, I phoned and I legged and I sat and thought, and I interviewed God knows how many people. Couple of times, I came pretty close to finding new stuff, too, but who cares whodunit? Not me. I wasn't looking for crimes with a reason behind them. I was looking for killings with no motive. Any time the scent got hot, I threw that case out. By this time, I had a feature shaping up—I'd call it 'Murder for What?' Good for a

couple spreads—maybe even a series.”

I thumped the file. “I guess I had the answer for weeks before I even knew it. Then, one night, I sat here and read everything through. And what do you know: in each and every one of these cases, someone was happy because of the murder! Or, anyway, happier. And I’m *not* talking about people who inherited the victims’ loot, or poor persecuted wives and children who would no longer have to put up with the old man’s payday drunks. Reach me the bottle, Henry.

“Now not a single one of this final stack showed motive or opportunity for the—let’s say ‘beneficiary’ of these murders. Like this one, where the old woman, her with a constitution like a buffalo, she’d been lying in bed for eight months pretending to be sick so her daughter wouldn’t marry. The girl was nine miles away when someone cut the old biddy’s throat.

“And this one here, an engineering student and a good one, working his own way through school and then had to quit and come home because his old man had doubled the size of the ancestral hardware store for no reason but that it had been small enough to handle by himself. So one warm Sunday, the kid is, no fooling, in church in front of eighty witnesses while, down the road, somebody parts the old man’s head with a tire iron. They never did find out who.

“And this one, this is particularly the best of all: a little old guy for years ran a flea circus, gluing costumes on ’em and making ’em turn little merry-go-rounds and all that kind of thing. Used to feed ’em off his arm. One fine day, someone swipes one of his pets and replaces it with *pulex cheopis*—a rat flea, to you—loaded to the eyeballs, or cephalothorax, as the case may be, with bubonic plague. First and only case of black plague in these parts in a hundred and eighty years.” I laughed.

“Somebody was happier?” Henry asked wonderingly.

“Well, the other fleas were. And besides, the old guy used to get a large charge out of cracking fleas in his tweezers right under the noses of the most squeamish women in the audience. You know how they go—*blip!*”

Henry grinned. “Blip,” he half-whispered.

"It's hot in here," I said uncomfortably. "Well, this is the part I was getting to, I mean about thinking unhumanly. I said to myself, now suppose, just for the sake of argument, that there's this guy, see, a sort of mutant, a slight variation to just outside the circle, and he has this special way of thinking; he goes around killing people who stand in other people's way. He never kills the same way or the same kind of person or in the same place. So how could anyone ever catch up with him?"

"Right away, I began looking into other deaths—the 'natural causes' ones. Why? Well, here, whoever he is, he might do some murders that look like murders, but he'd also do some that looked like natural causes; he'd have to; there's only just so many ways you can kill people and this busy, busy boy would have to try all of 'em. So I smelled around looking not for a killer, but for happy people, innocent people, who had benefited from these deaths.

"Whenever I found a situation like that, I checked back on the death. Sometimes it was a perfectly genuine croak, but time and again I found what you might find if you knew what you were looking for ... scarlet fever, for instance. People shouldn't die of scarlet fever, but you know what? Feed somebody just enough belladonna and a doctor will write a scarlet fever certificate for the late lamented, nice as you please, if he has no reason to be suspicious. And in these deaths—my busy boy's work, I mean—there's never any reason to be suspicious. Where's the—you pour it for once, Henry.

"Hey, Henry! I'm getting tighter'n a ticklish tick with a alum stick, haha ...

"'Course, by this time, the feature story was up the spout; I had a better use for the situation than a lousy feature or even a series. Yep. For weeks now, I've been following the meat-wagons and morguing around. All I do, I write 'em up when they look funny to me. I keep it to myself; it's all in the files here, every one of 'em. Oh, man, if the papers or the coroner or somebody got hold of those files, what a *hassle*! They'd dig up the marble orchards around here like potato patches! They'd find more little old embolisms and post-syncope!

"Say, did you know that *Acontium Napellus*, which is wolfsbane, which is aconite, has a root that grates up into a specially nippy kind of horseradish for them as likes it strong for a few brief seconds? There's a woman just down the street who curled up

and died last Tuesday and they called it heart failure; her daughter's already headed for Hollywood where she won't make anything but carhop, second class, but anyway it's what she wanted.

"Sooner or later, taking the notes I do the way I do at the deaths I investigate, this boy, this busy, busy fellow who is bringing so much sunshine into so many brutalized innocent lives, this boy will come over to me and say, 'Hi, chum, you looking for somebody?' "

"What will you do," gasped Henry without the question mark.

"What do you think?" I prodded.

"A reward, maybe? Or a big scoop—is that what they call it in newspapers?"

"Yes, in the movies. *Catch it, Hen*—hey, thanks. First time I knocked over a bottle in nine years, so help me. Mop up the ol' 'Justice' file—I call it the 'Justice' file; you like that, boy? Ooo ... ooh. I'm adrift, kid, and you know what? I love it. Pour me another. Do it m'self only I'm not myself if you see what I mmm. Good.

"So where was I? Oh, yes, you say I'd nab this busy boy and get a reward. Well, there you go thinking like a human being. I, sir Henry, will do no such thing. Now I don't know exactly why this boy does this bit and I don't care much, long's I can get him to do it for me. He wants to knock off obstacles from the path of poor imprisoned souls, I got just the chore for him. Just some justice is all.

"You see that scared rabbit came in here a while back with the tray, that Loretta? Now that thing with Loretta, it was great while it lasted, and it lasted too long about four months back. All the time around, oh, please don't drink so much, where have you been, but I was worried ... you know the routine, Henry. Now I could handle this myself, but even I can't think of a way which wouldn't be either expensive or messy.

"When you come right down to it, I'd just as soon keep her around.

"Loretta's not much trouble. She leaves me alone pretty much and comes in here about the time I'm bottle dippy every night and gets me into bed, talking on bright and cheery as anything, just as if I wasn't hooked over the desk here, green as a gherkin

and just as pickled ...

"The reason, the *real* reason I'd like to introduce this other unhuman type to my lovely wife is that I'd get more of a kick than you'd understand, just making him do it. Humans I can handle; this boy would be a real challenge. You can talk anybody into anything, and yourself out of anything, if you can just think of the right thing to say—and I'm the boy who can do it. Was your mother frightened by a keyboard?"

"What?" he asked, startled.

"That grin. What I'd like to know, I'd like to know how that busy boy covers so much territory. First he has to find 'em, then he has to plan how to knock 'em off, then he has to wait his chance ... so *many*, Henry! Five already this week and here it is only Thursday!"

"Maybe there's more than one," Henry suggested tentatively.

"Say, I never thought of that!" I exclaimed. "I guess it's because there's only one of me. Gosh, what a lovely idea—squads of unhumans thinking unhumanly, doing whatever they unhumanly want all over the lot. But why should the likes of him or them take chances just to make some humans happy?"

"They don't care if anyone gets happy," said Henry. "Why are you whispering?"

"Must be getting pretty tight, I guess; can't seem to do much better. Whee-ooo! Such a gorgeous load! *What?* What's that you said about the unhumans, that they don't care about making people happy? Listen, son, don't go telling me about unhumans. Who's the expert around here? I tell you, every time they knock somebody off, someone around stops getting mistreated. Those files there—"

"Right files, wrong conclusion. You keep worrying about what you are; we don't. We just *are*."

"We? Are you classifying yourself with *me*?"

"I wasn't," said Henry, not smiling. "Just what you are, human or not, I don't know and I don't care. You're a blowhard, though."

I snarled and heaved myself upward. But a whispered snarl doesn't amount to much and you can heave all you like and get nowhere when your arms are deadwood and your legs are about as responsive as those old inner tubes in your neighbor's back yard.

"What's the matter with me?" I rasped.

"You're about nine-tenths dead, that's all."

"Nine—what do you mean, Henry? What are you talking about? I'm just drunk, not—"

"Dicoumarin," he said. "You know what that is?"

"Sure I know what it is. Capillary poison. All the smallest blood vessels rupture and you bleed to death internally before you even know you're sick. Henry, you've poisoned *me!*"

"Well, yes."

I tried to struggle up, but I couldn't. "You weren't supposed to kill *me*, Henry! It was Loretta! That's why I brought you home—I guessed that the killer would be the opposite of the likes of me and you're about as opposite as anybody could be. And you know I can't stand her and killing her would make me happier. It's *her* you're supposed to kill, Henry!"

"No," he answered stubbornly. "It couldn't be her. I told you we don't care if somebody's made happier. It had to be you."

"Why? *Why?*"

"To stop the noise."

I looked at him, frowned foggily, shook my head.

"Self-defense," he explained patiently. "I'm a—I suppose you'd call it a telepath, though it isn't telepathy like you'd read about. No words, no pictures. Just a *noise*, I guess is the best word. There's a certain kind of mind—human or not, who cares?—it can't get angry, and it enjoys degrading other people and humiliating them, and when it's enjoying these things, it sets up ... that noise. We can't stand the noise. You—you're special. Hear you for miles. When we get rid of you, of course it makes a human happy—whoever it was you were humiliating." Then he said again, "We can't stand the noise."

I whispered, "Help me, Henry. Whatever it is, I'll stop. I promise I'll stop."

"You can't stop," he said. "Not while you're alive ... Oh, damn you, damn you, you're even enjoying dying!" He put forearms over his head—not over his ears—and rocked back and forth, and smiled and smiled.

"You smile all the time," I hissed. "Even now. *You enjoy killing.*"

"It isn't a smile and I kill only to stop the noise." He was

breathing hard. "How can I explain to anything like you? The noise—it's—some people can't stand the screek of a fingernail on a blackboard, some hate the scrape of a shovel on a cement sidewalk, most can't take the rasp of a file on metal."

"They don't bother me a bit," I said.

"Here, damn you, look here!" He snatched my sewing-machine needle and plunged it under his thumbnail. His lips spread wider. "It's *pain* ... pain! Only, with you, it's agony! I can't stand your noise! It puts my teeth on edge, it hurts my head, it deafens me!"

I remembered all the times he had smiled since I brought him home. And each time like the nail on the blackboard, like the shovel, like the rasp on the file, like the needle under the nail ...

I made a sort of laugh. "You'll come with me. They'll find the poison in me."

"Dicoumarin? You know better than that. And there won't be any in the whiskey glass, if that's what you're thinking. I gave it to you three hours ago, in Molson's, in the drink I didn't want and you took."

"I'll hang on and tell Lorrie."

"Tell me," he jeered, leaning toward me, his smile that wasn't a smile as huge as a boa's about to bite.

My tongue was thick, numb and wobbly. "Don't!" I gasped. "Don't ... jump me ... now, Henry."

Again he clutched his head. "Get mad! If you could get mad, it would go away, that noise! Argh, you snakes, you freaks ... all of you who enjoy hating! The girl, remember her, in the bar? She was making that noise until I got her angry ... she's going to get better now that you're dead."

I was going to say I wasn't dead, I wasn't yet, but my mouth wouldn't work.

"I'll take these," Henry said. I watched him stack the files right under my nose. "Everything's nice and tidy," he told me. "You were due to drink yourself to death, anyway, and here you are just like always. Only you won't sleep this one off ... I wish I could have got you sore."

I watched him unlock the door, saw him go, heard him talking to Lorrie briefly. Then the outer door banged.

Loretta came into the room and stopped. She sighed. “Oh, dear, we’re in a *special* mess tonight, aren’t we?” she said brightly.

I tried, how I tried to yell, to scream at her, but I couldn’t, and it was growing dark.

Loretta bent and pulled my arm around her neck. “You’ll have to help just a little now. *Upsy-daisy!*” Strong shoulders and a practiced hip hauled me upright, lolling. “You know, I do like your friend Henry. The way he smiled when he left—why, it made me feel that everything’s going to be all right.”

Bulkhead

YOU JUST DON'T LOOK through viewports very often.

It's terrifying at first, of course—all that spangled blackness, and the sense of disorientation. Your guts never get used to sustained free fall, and you feel, when you look out, that every direction is up, which is natural, or that every direction is *down*, which is sheer horror. But you don't stop looking out there because it's terrifying. You stop because nothing ever happens out there. You've no sensation of speed. You're not going anywhere. After the weeks, and the months, there's some change, sure; but day to day you can't see the difference, so after a while you stop looking for any.

Which, of course, eliminates the viewports as an amusement device, which is too bad. There aren't so many things for a man to do during a Long Haul that he can afford to eliminate anything. Getting bored with the infinities outside is only a reminder that the same could happen with your writing materials, and the music, with the stereo and all the rest of it. And it's hard to gripe, to say, "Why don't they install a such-and-such on these barrels?" because you've already got what a thousand space men griped about long since—many of them men with more experience, more imagination, and fewer internal resources (that is to say, more need) than you'll ever have. Certainly more than you have now; this is your first trip, and you're just making the transition from "inside looking out" to "inside looking on." It's a small world. It better be a little complicated.

A lot that has happened in worlds like these would be simple, if you knew about it. Not knowing is all right: it keeps you wondering. Some of it you can figure out, knowing as you do that a lot of men have died in these things, a lot have disappeared, ship and all, and some—but you don't know how many—have been taken out of the ships and straight to the laughing academy. You find out fairly soon, for example, that the manual controls are automatically relayed out, and stay out of temptation until

you need them to land. (Whether they'll switch in if you need them for evasive maneuvering some time, you don't know yet.) Who died, how many died, because they started playing with the manuals? And was it because they decided to quit and go home? Or because they convinced themselves that the autoastrogator had bugs in it? Or because they just couldn't stand all those stationary stars?

Then there's this: You're alone. You crouch in this little cell in the nose of your ship, with the curving hull to your left and the flat wall of the midship bulkhead to your right. You know that in previous models that bulkhead wasn't there. You can imagine what happened to some—how many?—ships to make it necessary, at last, to seal you away from your shipmate. Psychodynamics has come a long way, but it hasn't begun to alter the fact that human beings are the most feral, vicious, destructive, and self-destructive creatures God ever made. You called this a world; well, reduce a world to two separate nations and see what happens. Between two confined entities there's no mean and no median, and no real way of determining a majority. How many battered pilots have come home crazed, cooped up with the shredded bodies of their shipmates? You can't trust two human beings together, not for long enough. If you don't believe it look at the bulkhead; look again. It's there because it has to be there.

You're a peaceable guy. Scares you a little, to know how dangerous you are. Makes you a little proud, too, doesn't it?

Be proud of this, too: that they trust you to be alone so much. Sure, there is a shipmate; but by and large you're alone, and that's what's expected of you. What most people, especially earthside people, never find out is that a man who can't be by himself is a man who knows, away down deep, that he's not good company. You could probably make it by yourself altogether ... but you must admit you're glad you don't have to. You have access to the other side of the bulkhead, when you need it. If you need it. It didn't take you too long to figure out you'd use it sparingly. You have books and you have games, you have pictures and text tapes and nine different euphorics (with a watchdog dispenser, so you can never become an addict), all of which help you, when you need help, to explore yourself. But having another human mind to explore is a wonderful idea. The

wonder is tempered by the knowledge—oh, how smart you were to figure it out in time!—that the other mind is a last resort; if you ever use up the potentialities it holds for you, you've had it, brother.

So you squeeze it out slowly; you have endurance contests with yourself to see how long you can leave it alone. You do pretty well.

You go back over your life, the things you've done. People have written whole novels about twenty-four hours in a man's life. That's the way you think it all out, slowly, piece by piece; every feature of every face, and the way they were used; what people did, and why. Especially why. It doesn't take any time to remember what a man did, but you can spend hours thinking about why he did it.

You live it again and it's like being a little god, knowing what's going to happen to everyone. When you reported to Base there was a busload of guys with you. Now you know who would go all the way through the course and wind up out here; reliving it, you still know that, so you can put yourself back in the bus again and say, that stranger across the aisle is Pegg, and he isn't going to make it. He'll go home on furlough three months from now and he'll try to kill himself rather than come back. The freckled nape in the seat ahead of you belongs to the redhead Walkinok, who will throw his weight around during the first week and pay expensively for it afterward. But he'll make it. And you make friends with the shy dark guy next to you; his name is Steih and he looks like a big-brain; he's easy to talk to and smart, the kind of fellow who always goes straight to the top. And he won't last even until the first furlough; two weeks is all he can take, and you never see him again. But you remember his name. You remember everything, and you go back over it and remember the memories in between the memories. Did somebody on that bus have shoes that squeaked? Back you go and hunt for it; if it happened, you'll remember it.

They say anyone can recall this way; but for you, with what the psycho-dynamicians have done to you—or is it *for* you?—you can do more of this than anybody. There isn't anything that ever happened in your whole life that you can't remember. You can start at the beginning and go all the way through. You can start at the beginning and leap years in a second, and go through an

episode again ... get mad again ... fall in love again. And when you get tired of the events themselves, you can run them off again, to find out why. Why did Steih go through those years of study and preparation, those months of competition, when all the time he didn't *want* to be in the Space Service? Why did Pegg conceal from himself that he wasn't fit for the Space Service?

So you cast back, comb, compare and ponder, keeping busy. If you're careful, just remembering lasts a long time, then wondering why lasts even longer; and in between times there are the books and stereos, autochess and the music ... until you're ready to cast and comb in your memories again. But sooner or later—later, if you're especially careful—you'll get restless, and your life as it was played out, and the reasons why it was played just that way, all that gets old. You've been there. You can think of no new approach to any of it, and learn nothing more from it.

That's where the center-line bulkhead comes in handy. Its very shape is a friendly thing to you; the hull on your left is curved, as part of the ship's side, but the bulkhead is a flat wall. Its ubiquitous presence is a reminder that it has a function, like everything else in your world; that it is by nature a partition; that the existence of a partition presupposes another compartment; and that the other compartment is the size and shape of this one, and designed for a similar purpose—to be a dwelling for someone. With no sound nor sign of occupancy, the bulkhead still attests the life behind it, just by being there. It's a friendly flatness, a companionable feature of your world, and its company pervades all your thinking. You know it's your last resort, but you know too that it's a rich one. When at last you're driven to use it, you'll enter another kind of world, more complex and more engrossing than your own just because of the work it takes to get from place to place and the mystery of the fog between the places. It's a mind, another human mind, sharing this prison with you when at last you need sharing more than anything in all of space.

Who is it?

You think about that. You think a whole lot about that. Back at Base, in your last year, you and the other cadets thought about that more than anything. If they'd ever given you the shadow of a hint ... but wondering about it was apparently part of your training. You knew only that on your Long Haul, you would not

be alone. You had a pretty good idea that the choice of a shipmate for you would be a surprise. You looked around you at mess, in class, in the dormitory; you lay awake at night dealing out their faces in a sort of solitaire game; and sometimes you thought about one and said, that'd be find, we'd get along; and sometimes you said, that stinker? Lock me up with *him* and that bulkhead won't be tough enough. I'll kill him after the third day, so help me.

After they tapped you for your first Haul, this was the only thing you were scared about. Everything else, you thought you could handle. You knew your job inside out and backwards, and it wouldn't whip you. You were sharp-tuned, fine-honed, ready for anything that was under your control. You were even confident about being alone; it wouldn't get you. Away down deep no man believes he can be driven out of his mind, just as he cannot believe—really believe—he will ever be dead. That's the kind of thing that happens to someone else.

But this business of a shipmate wasn't under your control. You didn't control who it would be and you wouldn't control the guy after blastoff. It was the only unknown, and therefore the only thing that scared you. Leave it alone and you didn't have to so much as know you had a shipmate until you were good and ready. The only control you'd have would be the intercom button on your side of that bulkhead.

Being able to shut off a voice isn't control, though. You don't know what your shipmate will do. Or—*be*.

In those last tight days before blastoff there was one thing you became overwhelmingly aware of. Esprit de corps they call it. You and the other graduates were hammered into a mold, and hammered some more until the resiliency was gone out of you. You were alike and you did like things because you had grown to want to. You knew for certain that one of this tight, trustworthy little group would be picked for you; their training and yours, their whole lives and yours, pointed toward this ship, this Haul. Your presence on this ship summed up your training; your training culminated in your presence on the ship. Only a graduate cadet was fit to man the ship; the ship existed solely for the graduate cadet. This was something so self-evident that you never thought about it.

Not until now.

Because now, a few minutes ago, you were ready to push that button. You weren't sure if you'd broken all records for loneliness, for duration of solitary confinement, but you'd tried. You'd looked through the viewport until it ceased to mean anything; you'd read until you didn't care any more; you'd lived the almost-life of the stereos until you couldn't make believe you believed them; you'd listened to music until it didn't matter; and you'd gone over and over your life from its very beginnings until you'd completely lost perspective on it or anything or anyone in it. You'd found that you could go back to the viewport and cycle through the whole thing again, but you'd done that too, until the whole matrix of personal involvement was milked and sere and intolerable. Then the flatness of the bulkhead made itself felt. It seemed to bulge toward you, crowd you against the ship's side, and you knew it was getting to be time you pushed that button and started involving yourself in someone else.

Who? Pete or Krakow or that crazy redhead Walkinok? Or Wendover—you all called him Bendover—with all those incomprehensible shaggy-dog stories? Harris? Flacker? Beerbelly Blaustein or Cohen the Wire-haired Terror? Or Shank—what you all called him was a shame? Or Grindes, whose inexplicable nickname was Mickey Mouse. You'd rather hoped it would be Grindes, not because you liked him but because he was the one classmate you'd never known very well. He always looked on and kept his mouth shut. He'd be much more fun to explore than say, old Shank, who was so predictable you could practically talk in chorus with him.

So you tortured yourself, just for the sake of torture, with your thumb over the intercom button, until even the torture dried out and blew away.

You pushed.

You found out first of all that the intercom apparently had its own amplifier, energized when you held the button down, and that it took forever—well, three or four seconds—to warm up. First nothing, then a carrier, then the beginnings of a signal; then at last the voice of your shipmate, rushing up to full volume, as loud and as clear as if the bulkhead did not exist. And you get off that button as if it were suddenly white-hot, as if it had turned into a needle; and you're cowering against the outboard bulkhead, deep in shock, physically in silence but with that voice

going on and on and on, unbelievably in your unbelieving brain.

It was crying.

It wept wearily, as if you had tuned in toward the end of a long session of wild and lonesome grief. It cried quietly, exhaustedly, and as if there was in all the universe no hope. And it cried in a voice which was joltingly wrong for this place. It was a light, full voice, a tenor near to contralto in timbre. Its overtones were childlike—not childish; childlike—and it was wrong. Altogether wrong.

The wild ideas come first: *Stowaway?*

You almost laugh. For days before blastoff you were doped and drugged and immersed in high-frequency fields; hypnotized, worked and reworked mentally and physically. You were passively fed and passively instructed; you don't know now and you may never know all they did to you. But you can be sure it was done inside six concentric rings of "security" of one kind and another, and you can be sure that your shipmate got the same. What it amounted to was concentrated attention from a mob of specialists, every sleeping and waking second from the time you beered it up at the class farewell dinner to the time the accelerator tug lifted your ship and carried it screaming up and outward. Nobody is in this ship but those who belong in it; that you can absolutely bank on.

Mad idea the second: (Oh no; no! for a while you don't even dare think it. But with that kind of voice, that crying, you have to think of something. So you do, and you're scared, scared in a way you've never imagined before, and to a degree you didn't think was possible.) *There's a girl in there!*

You run those wordless syllables, those tired sobs, through your mind again, seeking for vocalizations as separated from the breathy, painful gasping that accompanied them. And you don't know. You just can't be sure.

So punch the button again. Listen some more. Or—ask. But you can't, you can't; the crazy idea might be true, and you couldn't stand that. They couldn't, they just couldn't put a girl on these ships with you—and then put her behind the bulkhead.

Then you have an instant fantasy about all that; you kneel suddenly, bumping your skull on the overhead, and flap your hands around the bulkhead, where it meets deck plates, nose compartment, overhead, after bulkhead; and all around, your

fingers ride the bead of a weld. You sit back, sweating a little and half laughing at yourself. Scratch one fantasy; there'll be no sliding partitions into no harems, this trip.

You stop laughing and think, they couldn't be that cruel! You're on a test run, sure, and it isn't the ship that's being tested. You know that and you accept it. But tests, tests ... must you throw a glass vase on a brick sidewalk to find out if it's brittle? You see one of your own hands going up and out to check for a panel, a join again. You sneer at it, and watch it stop in embarrassment and slink home guiltily to the deck beside you.

Well, say they weren't that cruel. Who did they put in there?

Not Walkinok. Not Shank. Not Harris or Cohen, or any cadet. A cadet wouldn't lie there and cry like that, like a child, a schoolgirl, a baby.

Some stranger, then. And now the anger comes, shouldering out all the fear. They wouldn't! This ship is everything a cadet was born for—made for. That tight chain that bound you with the others, an easy thing you all shared and never had to think about, that was a thing that didn't admit strangers. Aside from that, beyond that: this isn't a matter of desecrated esprit: it's a matter of moral justice. Nobody but a cadet *deserves* a ship! What did you give your life to, and what for? Why did you fluff off marriage, and freedom, and all the wonderful, unpredictable trivialities called "fun" that make most human lives worth living? Why did you hold still for Base routines, for the hazing you got from the upper classmen? Just to have some stranger, someone who wasn't even a cadet, wander in without training, shaping, conditioning, experience, and get on your ship?

Oh, it has to be a cadet. It couldn't be anyone else. Even a cadet that could break down and cry—that's a more acceptable idea than its being a woman, or a stranger.

You're still angry, but now it's not the kind of anger that stops you. You push the button. You hear the carrier; then the beginnings of something else ... ah. Breathing. Difficult, broken breathing, the sound of someone too tired to cry any more, even when crying has changed nothing and there are more tears to come.

"What the hell are you bawling about?" you yell.

The breathing goes on, and goes on. Finally it stops for a moment, and then a long, whispery, shuddery sigh. "Hey!" you

yell. “Hey—you in there!”

But there is no answer. The breathing is fainter, more regular. Whoever it is, is going to sleep.

You press even harder on the button, as if that would do any good, and you yell again, this time not even “Hey!” but a simpler, angrier syllable. You can think only that your shipmate chooses—*chooses*, by God—not to answer you.

You’re breathing hard now, but your shipmate isn’t. You hold your breath and listen. You hear the deep, quiet inhalations, and then a small catch, and a little sigh, the ghost of half a sob. “Hey!”

Nothing.

You let the button go, and in the sharp silence that replaces the carrier’s faint hum, that wordless syllable builds and builds inside you until it bursts free again. You can tell from the feel of your throat and the ringing in your ears that it’s been a time, a long, long time since you used your voice.

You’re angry and you’re hurt from these insults to yourself and to your service, and you know what? You feel good. Some of the stereos you have are pretty good; they take you right into battle, into the arms of beautiful women, into danger, and from time to time you could get angry at someone in them. You could, but you haven’t for a long time now. You haven’t laughed or been angry since ... since ... well, you can’t even remember when. You forgot how and you’ve forgotten just when it was you forgot. And now look. The heart’s going, the sweat ... this is fine.

Push the button again, take another little sip of anger. It’s been aging; it’s vintage stuff. Go ahead. You do, and up comes the carrier.

“Please,” says the voice. “Please, please ... say something else.”

Your tongue is paralyzed and you choke, suddenly, on a drop of your own saliva. You cough violently, let go the button, and pound yourself on the chest. For a moment you’re in bad shape. Coughing makes your thinking go in spurts, and your thinking is bouncing up and down on the idea that until now you didn’t really believe there was anyone in there at all. You get your wind and push the button again. The voice says, “Are you all right? Can I do anything?”

You become certain of something else: that isn’t a voice you recognize. If you ever heard it before you sure don’t remember it.

Then the content of it hits you. "Can I do anything?"

You get mad again. "Yeah," you growl, "hand me a glass of water." You don't have your thumb on the button so you just say what pops into your mind. You shake yourself like a wet bird dog, take a deep breath, and lean on the control again.

Before you can open your mouth you're in a hailstorm of hysterical laughter. "Glass of water ... uh-uh-uh ... that's good. You don't know what this means," says the voice, suddenly sober and plaintive, "I've waited so long, I've listened to your music and the sound from your stereos ... You never talk, you never say anything at all; I never even heard you cough before."

Part of your mind reacts to that: That's unnatural, not even to cough, or laugh aloud or hum. Must be a conditioning. But most of it explodes at this stranger, this *intruder*, talking away like that without a word of explanation, of apology, talking as if that voice had a right to be here. "*Shaddap!*"

"I was beginning to think you were deaf 'n' dumb. Or maybe even that you weren't there at all. That was the thing that scared me the most."

"Shhut up," you hiss, with all the fury, all the deadly warning you can command.

"I knew they wouldn't," says the voice happily. "They'd never put a man out here by himself. That would be too—" It stops abruptly as you release the button.

My God, you think. The dam has boist. That charachter'll chunter along like that for the duration. You press the button quickly, hear "—all alone out here, you get scared to look out the view—" and you cut him off again.

That stuff like an invisible mist you see melting away is all that conjecture, those wonderful half-formed plans of shipping out with Walkinok or the Wire-haired Terror. You were going to review your courses, remember? Slow and easy—take a week on spatial ballistics or spectroscopy. Think it all over for a day between sentences. Or laugh over the time you and the Shank got beered up at the canteen and pretended you were going to tie up the C.O. and jet him off with Provost, the head PD man, for a shipmate. The general would get all the psychodynamics he needed. The general was always talking psychodynamics, Colonel Provost was always doing psychodynamics. Ah, it seemed funny at the time, anyway. It wasn't so much the beer. It was knowing

the general, knowing Provost, that made it funny. How funny would it be with a stranger?

They give you someone to talk to. They give you someone you haven't anything to talk to *about!* The idea of shipping a girl behind the bulkhead, now, that was a real horrible idea. That was torture. Well, so's this. Only much more refined.

A thought keeps knocking, and you finally back off and let it in. Something to do with the button. You push it and you can hear your shipmate. You release it and ... shut off the intercom? No, by the Lord you don't. When you were coughing, you were off that button. "*Can I do anything?*"

Now what the hell kind of business is this? (That detached part of your mind reaches hungrily for the pulses of fury: ah, it feels good!) Do you mean to sit there and tell me, you rage silently at the PD men who designed this ship, that unless I push that button my shipmate can hear everything that goes on with me? The intercom's open on the other side all the time, open on this side only when I push the button, is that it?

You turn and glare out the viewport, staring down the cold distant eye of infinity, and *Where the hell*, you rage silently, *where the hell's my privacy?*

This won't do. This won't do at all. You figured right from the start that you and your shipmate would be pretty equal, sure, but on a ship, even a little two-passenger can like this, someone's got to be in command. Given that the other compartment has the same stereos, the same dispensers, the same food and water and everything else, and the only difference between these living quarters is that button—who's privileged? Me, because I get to push the button? Or my shipmate, who gets to listen in on me when I so much as belch?

Oh, I know, you think suddenly. That's a PD operative in there, a psychodynamics specialist assigned to observe me! You almost laugh out loud; relief washes over you. PD work is naturally hush-hush. You'll never know how many hours during your course you were under hypnosis. It was even rumored around that some guys had cerebral surgery done by PD boys, and never knew it. They had to work in secret for the same reason you don't stir your coffee with an ink stick. PD is one field where the tools must leave no mark.

Well, fine, fine. At last this shipmate makes some sense, you've

got an answer you can accept. This ship, this trip, is of and for a cadet, but it's PD business. The only non-cadet who'd conceivably board you would have to be a PD tech.

So you grin and reach for the button—then, remembering the way it works, that the intercom's open from your side when you're off the button, you draw your hand back, face the bulkhead, and say easily, "Okay, PD, I'm on to you. How'm I doing?" You wonder how many cadets tumble to the trick this soon. You push the button and wait for the answer.

The answer is "Hah?" in a mixture of shyness and mystification.

You let go the button and laugh. "No sense stringing it out, Lieutenant." (This is clever. Most PD techs are looeys; one or two are master sergeants. Right or not, you haven't hurt his feelings.) "I know you're a PD man."

There's a silence from the other side, then, "What's a PD man?"

You get a little sore. "Now see here, Lieutenant, you don't have to play any more games."

"Gosh," says the bulkhead, "I'm no lieutenant. I—"

You cut him off quickly. "Sergeant, then."

"You got me all wrong," says that damnable, shy tenor.

"Well, you're PD anyway," I snap.

"I'm afraid I'm not."

You can't take much more of this. "Well, what the hell are you? You're a man, aren't you?"

A silence. And as it beats by, that anger and that fear of torture begin to mount, hand in hand. "Well!" you roar.

"Well," says the voice, and you can practically see it shuffle its feet. "I'm fifteen years old ..."

You drag out your senior-class snap; there's a way of talking to fourth and third classmen that makes 'em jump. "Mister, you give an account of yourself, but now. What's your name?"

"Skampi."

"Skampi? What the hell kind of name is that?"

"It's what they call me."

Did you detect a whisper of defiance there? "Sir!" you rasp.

The defiance disappears. "It's what they call me ... sir."

"And what are you doing on my ship, mister?"

A frightened gulp. "I—I'm sorry, uh, sir. They put me on."

"They? They?"

"At the Base ... sir," he amended quickly.

"You were on Base just how long, mister?" That "mister" could be a lead-shotted whiplash if you did it right. It was sure being done right.

"I don't know, sir." You have the feeling the punk's going to burst into tears again. "They took me to a big laboratory and there were a lot of sort of booths with machines in them. They asked me a lot of questions about did I want to be a space man. Well, I did, I always did ever since I was a kid. So after a while they put me on a table and gave me a shot and when I woke up I was here."

"Who gave you a shot? What was his name?"

"I never ... I didn't find out, sir." A pause. "A big man. Old. He had gray hair, very short. He had green eyes."

Provost, by God, you think. This is PD business, all right, but from where I sit, it's monkey business. "You know any spatial ballistics?"

"No, sir. Some day I—"

"Astrogation?"

"Only what I picked up myself. But I'll—"

"Gravity mechanics? Differentials? Strength of materials? Light-metal fission? Relativity?"

"I—I—"

"Well? Well? Speak up, mister."

"I heard of them, sir."

"You heard of them sir!" you mimic. "Do you know what this ship is for?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Everybody knows that. This is the Long Haul. When you come back from this, you get your commission and they give you a star ship!" And if the voice had shuffled feet once, now its eyes shone.

"You figure to get a star ship, mister?"

"Well, I—I—"

"You think they give commands to Boy Scouts just because the Boy Scout wants to go to space *awful* bad?"

No answer.

You jeer, "Have you got the slightest idea how much training a cadet has to go through, how much he has to learn?"

"Well, no, but I guess I will."

"Sir!"

“Sir. Well, they put me aboard, all those officers who asked me the questions and everything. It must be all right. Hey!” he says excitedly, all the crushed timidity disappearing, replaced by a bubbling enthusiasm. “I know! We have all this time ... maybe you’re supposed to teach me astrogation and relativity, and all that.”

Your jaw drops at the sheer childishness of it. And then something really ugly drifts up and smothers everything else.

For some reason your mind flashes back to the bus, the day you got to Base. You can remember back easily to all the faces you worked with, those who made it and those who didn’t. But your class had thirty-eight cadets in it. That bus must’ve held fifty. What happened to the rest? You’d always assumed they went into other sections—ground crew, computer men, maintenance. Suppose they’d been sorted out, examined for some special trait or talent that only the PD men knew about. Suppose they were loaded right aboard ships, each with a graduate cadet?

And why?

Suppose these punks, greenhorns, Boy Scouts, *children*—suppose they were the ones slated for a commission? Suppose guys like you, thinking you were the cream of the crop, and the top cream off that, suppose all along you’d tested out as second-grade material. Suppose you were the one who did the sweating and cramming and took the hazing and the demerits and the lousy mess-hall food, not to command a star ship, not to get a commission, but just to be private tutor to a boy genius who wanted to go to space *awful* bad.

This wouldn’t make sense anywhere else but in this service. It barely made sense there. But look, a star-ship commander might make two trips in his whole career, and that would be all. Eighteen years each round trip, with his passengers in cold packs and a cargo of serums, refractories, machine tools, and food concentrate for the xenologists and e-t mineralogists who were crazy enough to work out there. Training the commander for such a ship was easy, as far as operating knowledge was concerned, though there was a powerful lot of it. But training him to stay conscious—awake and aware—and alone—for all those years was something else again. Few men like that were born; they had to be made. Most of your recluses, your hermits, all through history, were guys who had a couple of things drastically

wrong with them. There couldn't be anything wrong with a star-ship commander. He had to be captain and deck crew, and know his black hole as well (though most of the drive machinery down there was automatic), and stay alert and sane in a black, mad, weightless emptiness God never made him for. You could give him more books and pictures, games and music than even he would have time for, and still not be sure he'd stay sane unless he had some very special inner resources. These—and one other thing—were what a cadet was screened for, and what he was trained in. They packed him full of technical knowledge, psyched him to a fare-thee-well, and when they figured he was machine-finished and carrying a high gloss, they sealed him in a can and threw it out for the Long Haul. The course was preset. It might last fourteen months, and it might last three years, and after a guy got back—if he got back—he would be fit to take out a star ship or he would not. As for the shipmate—well, you'd always assumed that PD was looking for a way to shake down two guys at once so that they would carry eight, ten at once, and at last natural human gregariousness would have a chance to compete with the pall of black distances. So far, though, psychic disorientation had made everything mean and murderous in a man explode into action; putting more than a single human being on those boats was just asking for slaughter and shipwreck.

The other thing required of you besides technical ability and these inner resources is *youth*. You're only twenty-two. You're twenty-two, so full of high-intensity training that, as Walkinok once said, you feel your brain convolutions are blown out smooth like a full bladder. And you've compacted this knowledge, coded it, used it. You're so full of it that it's bound to ooze out onto anyone around you. You're twenty-two, and you're sealed up in a can with a thirsty-headed fifteen-year-old who knows nothing but wants to go to the stars *awful* bad. And you can forget how stupid he seems to be, too, because you can bet your bulging cortex that the kid as an I.Q. of nine hundred and umpteen, so he can afford to act stupid. Cry.

What a dirty rotten lousy deal to put you through all this just to shave seven years off the age of a star-ship commander! Next thing you know they'll put a diapered baby in with a work-weary sucker of a cadet, and get three star trips out of him instead of two! And what's become of *you*? After you've done your generous

stint of tutoring, they pin a discharge emblem on your tunic and say well done, Cadet, now go raise Brussels sprouts; and you stand at attention and salute the downy-cheeked squirt in all the gold braid and watch him ride the gantry to the control cabin you've aimed at and sweat for ever since you were weaned!

You sprawl there in that living-space, so small you can't stand up in it, and you look at that bland belly of a bulkhead with its smooth round navel of a button, and you think, well, there's a lot of guts back of that. You heave a deep breath (while still the detached part of your mind looks on; now it's saying wonderingly, aren't you the guy who was scared because nothing could get him excited anymore?) and you speak; and your voice comes out sounding quite different from anything you've ever heard from anyone before. Maybe you've never been this mad before.

"Who told you to say that?"

You push the button and listen.

"Say ... what? Uh, sir?"

"About me teaching you. Anybody at Base?"

"Why ..." He seems to be thinking. *"Why, no, sir. I just thought it would be a good idea."*

You don't say anything. Just hold the button down.

He says diffidently, "Sort of ... pass the time?" When you still don't say anything, he says wistfully, "I'd try. I'd try awful hard."

You let go the button and growl, "I just bet you would. You just thought it up all your own little self, huh?"

"Well, yes."

"You're a bright boy. You're a real smart ambitious little louse!" You push the button real quick but all you get is an astonished silence. You say, real composed, almost gentle: "That 'louse' now, that's not just a figure of speech, little boy. I mean that. I mean you're a crummy little crawler looking to suck blood after somebody else's done all the work. You know what you do? You just make like you're all alone in this can. You don't talk to me and you don't listen to me and I'll do you a favor, I'll forget all about you too. I'm not going to bat your eyeballs together just yet, but don't call me generous, little boy. It's just that I can't reach in there just now."

"No!" Now, that boy can make a real piteous noise when he wants to. *"No—no! Wait—please!"*

“Well?”

“I don’t under—I mean, I’m sorry, Cadet. I’m honest-to-pete sorry, I never meant—”

But you cut him off. You lie back and close your eyes; you’re thrumming with fury, right down to your toenails. (This, says your internal observer, is all right. This is living.)

The weeks pass, and so do more weeks. You shoot a star and make some notes, and wait a while and shoot it again, and pretty soon you have enough data to fool around with. You get your stylus and block and the point darts around the way you want it to, and those old figures sit up and lie down and rush around just the way you want them to. You laugh when you do it; wouldn’t Junior just love to learn some of these tricks? Anyway, you figure you’re just past the cusp perihelion of you parabola and you’re starting back. You laugh again. The sound of your voice reminds you that he can hear you, so you crawl over to the bulkhead and push the button.

“Cadet,” he says. “Please, Cadet. Please.” And you know what? His voice is hoarse and weak; the syllables come out as if they’re meaningless from repetition. He’s probably been lying in there for weeks bleating. “Cadet—please—Cadet—please,” every time you clicked the stylus against your teeth or set the quadrant on you sun gun.

You spend a lot of time looking out the viewport, but you get sick of that and turn to the euphorics. You see a lot of stereo shows. You are somehow aware of the button in the bulkhead but you ignore it. You read. You get a lot of use out of the octant; it seems you take a lot more bearings than you have to. And when at last the button starts to be intrusive, you make a real effort and leave it alone; you figure out something else to do instead.

You take a careful survey of your instruments to figure which one you need least, and finally decide on the air-speed indicator. You’ve spent plenty of time in a mock-up and you know you can compute your air speed by the hull temperature plus your ground-rise radar. You dismount the instrument and take it apart, and get the diamond bearing. You go through the games locker and the equipment chest until you put together a nickel rod and a coil, and you hook onto your short-range radio where the oscillations suit you. You cement the diamond to the tip of the

rod, shove the rod through the long axis of the coil. You turn on the juice and feel rather than hear the rod humming softly. The phenomenon, dear pupil, you say—but silently—is magnetostriction, whereby the nickel rod contracts slightly in the magnetic field. And since the field is in oscillation, that diamond on the tip is vibrating like crazy.

You get your stylus and after careful consideration you decide on a triangle with round corners, just big enough to shove an arm through comfortably; the three corners would make peepholes, so you can see where your arm's going. All the while you have quick fantasies about it. You'll knock the triangular piece out of the bulkhead and stick your face in the hole and say, "Surprise!" And he'll be cowering there wondering what goes on. And you'll say, shake and let bygones be; and he'll jump over, all eager, and you'll take his hand and drag it through the hole and get his wrist in both hands and put your back against the bulkhead and pull till his shoulder dislocates. And maybe you could break the arm, too. All the while he's gasping, "Cadet, please," until you get tired of amusing yourself and haul the wrist around and sink your teeth in it. Then he starts to bleed, and you just hold him there while cadet-please gets fainter and fainter, and you explain to him all about differential equations and mass ratios.

And while you're thinking about this you're going around and around the blunted triangle with your vibrating diamond. The bulkhead is thick as hell, and tough—it's hull-metal, imagine that, for an inboard bulkhead!—but that's all right. You've got plenty of time. And bit by bit, your scored lines goes deeper and deeper.

Every once in a while you take a breather. It occurs to you to wonder what you'll say when you're grappled in and the colonel sees that hole in the bulkhead. You try not to wonder about this but you do all the same, a whole lot. You run it over in your mind and sometimes the colonel says good, cadet, that's real resourcefulness, the kind I like to see. But other times it doesn't quite come out that way, especially with the kid dead on one side of the bulkhead and his blood all over the place on the other side.

So maybe you won't kill him. You'll just scare him. Have fun with him.

Maybe he'll talk, too. Maybe this entire Long Haul was set up by PD just to find out if you'd cooperate with your shipmate, try

to teach him what you know, at any cost. And you know, if you thought more of the Service than you do about your own dirty career in it, that's just what you'd do. Maybe if you did that they'd give you a star ship anyway, you and the kid both.

So anyway, this cutting job is long and slow and suits you fine; no matter what you think you go on with it, just because you started. When it's finished you'll know what to do.

Funny, the result of this trip was going to be the same as some of those you'd heard whispered about, where a ship came in with one guy dead and the other ... but that was the difference. To do a thing like that, those guys must have been space-happy, right out of the groove. You're doing it, sure, but for different reasons. You're no raving loony. You're slow and steady, doing a job, knowing just exactly why ... Or you will, when the time comes.

You're real happy this whole time.

Then all that changes. Just why you can't figure out. You turned in and you slept, and all of a sudden you're wide awake. You're thinking about some lab work you did. It was a demonstration of eddy-current effects. There was a copper disk as thick as your arm and a meter in diameter, swinging from a rope in the center of the gymnasium. You hauled it up to the high ceiling at the far end and turned it loose. There was a big electromagnet set up in the middle of the place, and as the disk reached the bottom of its long swing it passed between the poles of the magnet, going like hell. You threw the switch and as the disk reached the bottom of its long swing it passed between the poles of the magnet, going like hell. You threw the switch and the disk stopped dead right where it was, and rang like a big gong though nothing had touched it.

Then you remembered the sixty zillion measurements you'd taken off a synchro-cosmotron so big that it took you four minutes at a fast walk to get from one end to the other.

You remember the mock-ups, the hours and hours of hi-G, no-G; one instrument out, another, all of 'em, some of 'em; simulated meteorites on collision orbit; manual landing techniques, until your brains were in your hands and the seat of your pants, and you did the right things with them without thinking. Even exhausted, you did it right. Even doped up.

You remember the trips down with Harris and Blaustein and the others. Something happened to you every time you so much

as walked down a street with those guys. It was a thing you'd never told anyone. Part of it was something that happened between the townspeople and your group. Part of it was between your group and yourself. It all added up to being a little different and a little better ... but not in a cocky way. In a way that made you grateful to the long heavy bulk of a star ship, and what such ships are for.

You sit up in your bunk, with that mixed-up, wide-awake feeling, reaching for something you can't quite understand, some one simple thing that would sum up the huge equipment, the thousands of measurements, the hours of cramming and the suspense of examinations; the seat-of-the-pants skills and the pride in town ...

And suddenly you see what it is. That kid in there, he could have an I.Q. of nine goddam thousand and never learn how to put down a rocket with all his instruments out and the gyros on manual. Not by somebody telling him over an intercom when he's never even sat in a G-seat. He might memorize twelve thousand slightly varying measurements off a linear accelerator but he wouldn't gain that certain important thing you get when you make those measurements yourself. You could describe the way the copper disk rang when the eddy current stopped it, but he would have to see it happen before it did to him all the things it did to you.

You still don't know who that kid is or why he's here, but you can bet one thing: he isn't here to pick your brains and take your job. You don't have to like him and you can be mad he's aboard instead of Harris or Walky; but get that junk out of your head right now about his being a menace to you. And where did that poisonous little crumb in your brain come from? Since when are you subject to fear and jealousy and insecurity; since when do you have to guard yourself against your own imagination?

Come the hell off it, Cadet. You're not that good a teacher; he's not that much of a monster.

Monster! God, did you hear him cry, that time?

You feel twenty pounds lighter (which is odd since you're still in free fall), and as if you'd just washed your face. "Hey, Krampi!"

You go push the button and wait. The carrier comes. Then you hear a sharp, short inhalation. A sniff ... no, you won't call it that. "Skampi, sir," he corrects you timidly.

"Okay, whatever you say. And knock off the 'sir.' "

"Yessir. Yes."

"What were you crying about?"

"When, s—"

"Okay," you say gently. "You don't have to talk about it."

"Oh, nonono. No. I wasn't trying to deny it. I ... cried twice. I'm sorry you heard me. You must think ..."

"I don't think," you say sincerely. "Not enough."

He thinks that over and apparently drops it. "I cried right after blastoff."

"Scared?"

"No ... yes, I was, but that wasn't why. I just ..."

"Take your time."

"Th-thanks. It was just that I—I'd always wanted to be in space. I thought about it in the daytime and dreamed about it at night. And all of a sudden there it was, happening to me for real. I ... thought I ought to say something, and I opened my mouth to do it and all of a sudden I was crying. I couldn't help it. I guess I—Crazy, I guess."

"I wouldn't say so. You can hear talk and see pictures and get yourself all ready, but there's nothing like doing it. *I* know."

"You, you're used to it." He seems to want to say something else; you hold the button down. Finally, with difficulty, he says, "You ... you're big, aren't you? I mean, you're ... you know. Big."

"Well, yes."

"I wish I was. I wish I was good for ... well, something."

"Everybody push you around?"

"Mm."

"Listen," you say, "You know those star ships. You take a single human being and put him down next to a star ship. They're not the same size and they're not the same shape, and one of 'em's pretty insignificant. But you can say *this* built *this*."

"Y-e-eah." It is a whisper.

"Well, you're that human being, that selfsame one. Ever think of that?"

"No."

"Well, neither did I till now," you say rapidly. "It's the truth, though."

He says, "I wish I was a cadet."

"Where do you come from, kid?"

“Masolo. It’s no-place. Jerk town. I like big places with big stuff going on. Like the Base.”

“Awful lot of people charging around.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I don’t like crowds much, but the Base—it’s worth it.”

You sit and look at the bulkhead. It’s companionable suddenly, and sort of changed, as if it were suddenly warm, or quilted. You get a splinter of light off the bright metal where you’ve scored it. It’s down pretty deep. A man could stand up to it and knock that piece out with a maul, if a man could stand up, if he had a maul. You say, suddenly and very fast as if you’re afraid something’s going to stop you, “Ever do anything you were really ashamed of? I did when I talked to you the way I did. I shouldn’t’ve done it like that. I don’t know what got into me. Yes, I do and I’ll tell you. I was afraid you were a boy genius planted on me to strip my brains and take my command. I got scared.” It all comes out like that. You feel much better and at the same time you’re glad Walkinok and Shank aren’t around to hear you spout like that.

The kid’s very quiet for a while. Then he says, “One time my mother sent me to the market and something was a special. I forget what. But anyway I had forty cents’ change and I forgot about it. I found it in my pants in school the next day and bought a star-ship magazine with it, and never told her about it. I used to get every issue that way after that. She never missed it. Or maybe she did but didn’t say anything. We were pretty hard up.”

You understand that the kid is trying to give you something, because you apologized to him. You don’t say anything more about that. Right here a wonder starts to grow. You don’t know what it is but you know that stand-off-and-watch part of your mind is working on it. you say, “Where is this Masolo?”

“Upstate. Not far from the Base. Ever since I was a baby the axi-tugs were shaking the house when they took off. There’s a big tree outside the house and all the leaves shiver, with the tugs, you know. I used to climb out a limb and get on the roof and lie down on my back. Sometimes you could see the star ships orbiting. Just after the sun goes down, sometimes you can ...” He swallows; you can hear it plainly. “I used to put out my hand. It was like a firefly, up there.”

“Some firefly,” you say.

“Yeah. Some firefly.”

Inside you the wonder is turning to a large and luminous astonishment. It's still inexpressible so you leave it alone.

The kid is saying, "I was with two other kids out by the high school one time. I was just a kid, eleven I think. Well, some gorillas from the high school, they chased us. We ran and they caught up with us. The other kids started to fight them. I got over to one side and when I had a chance I ran. I ran all the way home. I wish I'd stayed there with those other two kids. They got the tar kicked out of them and I guess it hurt, but I guess it stopped hurting after some teacher came along and broke up the fight. But I get hurt every time I think about it, running away like that. Boy, did those two give me a razzing when they saw me next day. Boy. So what I wanted to ask you, you don't think a kid who would run away like that could be a cadet." He ends it like that, flat. No question.

You think about it. You've been in some fine brawls as a cadet. You're in a bar and someone cracks wise, and your blood bubbles up, and you wade in, feeling fine. But maybe that's just because of the corps, the business of belonging. You say carefully, "I think if I was in a fight I'd rather have a guy on my side who knew what cowardice felt like. I think it would be like having two guys on my side, instead of one. One of the guys wouldn't care if he got hurt and the other guy would never want to be hurt that way again. I think a fellow like that would be a pretty good cadet."

"Well, all right," says the kid, in that funny whisper.

Suddenly the inner astonishment bursts into sight and you recognize what it is about this kid. At first you were scared of him, but even when that went away you didn't like him. There was no question of liking him or not liking him; he was a different species of being that you couldn't have anything to do with. And the more you talked with him the more you began to feel that you didn't have to set yourself apart from him, that he had a whole lot you didn't have and that you could use it. The way he talked, honest and unabashed, you don't know how to do that. You nearly choked to death apologizing to him.

Suddenly it's very important to get along with this kid. It isn't because the kid is important; it's because if you can get along with somebody so weak, so wet behind the ears, and yet in his particular way so rich, why, you can get along with anybody, even your own lousy self. You realize that this thing of getting

along with him has extension after extension. Somehow, if you can find more ways to get along with this kid, if you can see more things the way he sees them with no intolerance and no altitude, you'll tap something in yourself that's been dried up a long time now.

You find all this pretty amazing, and you settle down and talk to the kid. You don't eke it out. You know he'll last all the way back to the Base and have plenty left over. You know, too, that by the time you get there this kid will know a cadet can be a louse too. You can give him that much. The way you treated him, he was hurt, but you know, he wasn't mad? He doesn't think he's good enough to get mad at a cadet. Well, we're going to fix that.

The time goes by and the time comes; the acceleration tug reaches out and grabs you high up, so after all that manual-control drill you don't have a thing to do but sit there and ride it down. The tug hovers over the compound right near the administration building, which disappears in a cloud of yellow dust. You sink down and down in the dust cloud until you think they must be lowering you into a hole in the ground; then at last there's a slight thump and an inhuman amount of racket as the tug blasts away free. After that there's only the faint whisper of the air circulator, the settling dust, and a profoundly unpleasant feeling in calves and buttocks as the blood gets used to circulating in a 1-G environment.

"Now don't you forget, Skampi," you say. You find it difficult to talk; you've got a wide grin plastered across your face and you can't cast it adrift. "Just as soon as ever they're through with you, you come looking for me, hear? I'll buy you a soda."

You lean back in your G-chair and hold the button. "I can drink beer," he says manfully.

"We'll compromise. We'll make your soda with beer. Listen, kid. I can't promise, but I know they're fooling with the idea of a two-man crew for starships. How'd you like to go with me, one trip anyhow? Course, you'll have to be conditioned six ways from the middle, double-time, and it'll be real tough. But—what do you say?"

And you know, he doesn't say anything?

He laughs, though.

Now here comes Provost, the big brass of Psychodynamics, and a young M.P. That's all the welcoming committee you'll get. The compound's walled and locked, and no windows look out on it. They must have unloaded some pretty sorry objects from these cans from time to time.

They open the hatch from the outside and you immediately start coughing like hell. Your eyes say the dust has settled but your lungs say no. By the time you have your eyes wiped the M.P. is inside, and squatting on the deck, crossed-legged. He says cheerfully, "Hi-kay dee. This here's a stun gun and if you so much as look wall-eyed at me or the colonel you get flaked out like a heaving-line."

"Don't worry about me," you say from behind that silly grin. "I got no quarrel with anybody and I like it here. Good morning, Colonel."

"Look out for this one," said the M.P. "Likes it here. He's sick."

"Shat up, wheelhead," says the colonel cheerfully. He has his gray crewcut and barrel torso shoved into the hatch and it's real crowded in that little cabin. "Well, Cadet, how are we?"

"We're fine," you say. The M.P. cocks his head a little to one side and gets bright-eyed; he thinks you're sassing the colonel, but you're not; when you say "we" you mean you and your shipmate.

"Anything special happen?"

The answer to that is a big fat yes, but it would take forever to tell. It's all recorded anyway; PD doesn't miss a trick. But that's from then till now, and done with. I'm concerned with from now on. "Colonel, sir, I want to talk to you, right now. It's about my shipmate."

The colonel leans a little further in and slaps the M.P.'s gun hand. He's in front of the guy so I can't see his face. "Beat it, wheelhead."

The M.P. clears out. You stagger up out of the G-seat and climb through the hatch. The colonel catches your biceps as you stagger. After a long time in free fall your knees won't lock as you walk; you have to stiffen each one as your weight comes on it, and you have to concentrate. So you concentrate but that doesn't stop you from talking. You skim over the whole business, from your long solo to being reduced to meeting the shipmate, and the fight you had with yourself over that, and then this thing that

happened with the kid—weeks of it, and here you feel you’ve only just begun. “You can pick ’em, sir,” you pant as you hobble along. “Do you always use a little know-nothing kid? Where do you find ’em? Does it always work this well?”

“We get a commander on every ship,” he says.

“Hey, that’s great, sir.”

“We don’t have very many ships,” he says, just as cheerfully.

“Oh,” you say. Suddenly you stop. “Wait, sir, what about Skampi? He’s still locked in his side.”

“You first,” says the colonel. We go on into the PD lab.

“Up you go,” he says, waving. You look at the big chair with its straps and electrodes and big metal hood. “You know, they used chairs like these in the French Revolution,” you say, showing off. You’re just busting with cheerfulness today. You *never* felt like this. You sit in the big chair. “Look, sir, I want to get started on a project right away. This kid, now, I tell you he’s got a lot on the ball. He’s space man right to the marrow-bones. He comes right from around here, that little place up the pike, Masolo. You know. He got shook out of his bassinet by the axi-tugs; he spent his childhood lying on his back on the roof looking for the star ships in orbit. He’s—”

“You talk all the time,” says the colonel mildly. “Sum up, will you? You made out with your shipmate. You think you could do it again in a star ship. That it?”

“Think we can try it? Hey, really? Look, can I be the one to tell him, Colonel?”

“Shut your mouth and sit still.”

Those are orders. You sit still. The colonel gets you strapped in and connected up. He puts his hand on the switch. “Where did you say you came from?”

You didn’t say, and you don’t, because the hood swings down and you’re surrounded by a sudden dissonant chord of audio at tremendous amplitude. If you had been allowed to say, though, you wouldn’t have known. The colonel doesn’t even give you time to be surprised at this. You sink into blackness.

It gets light again. You have no idea how much time has passed, but it must be a good deal, because the sunlight from outside has a different color and slants a different way through the venetian blinds. On a bench nearby is a stack of minicans with your case

number painted on each one—that's the tape record of your Long Haul. There's some stuff in there you're not proud of but you wouldn't swap the whole story for anything. "Hello, Colonel."

"You with us again? Good." He looks at an enlarged film strip and back at me. He shows me. It's a picture of the bulkhead with the triangular score in it. "Magnetostriction vibrator, with a diamond bearing for a drill bit, hm? Not bad. You guys scare me. You really do. I'd have sworn that bulkhead couldn't be cut and that there was nothing in the ship that could cut it. You must've been real eager."

"I wanted to kill him. You know that now," you say happily.

"You damn near did."

"Aw, now, Colonel, I wouldn't have gone through with it."

"Come on," he says, opening the buckles.

"Where, sir?"

"To your space can. Wouldn't you like to have a look at it from the outside?"

"Cadets aren't permitted—"

"You qualify," says the old man shortly.

So out you go to the compound. The can still stands where it was landed. "Where's Skampi?"

The colonel just passes you an odd look and walks on. You follow him up to the can. "Here, around the front."

You walk around to the bow and look up at it. It's just the shape it ought to be from the way it looked from inside, except it looks a little like a picture of a whale caught winking at you ... Winking? One-eyed!

"Do you mean to tell me you had that kid in a blind compartment, without so much as a viewport?" you rage.

The colonel pushes you. He does it again. "Sit. Over there. On the hatch. You returning heroes and your manic moods ... *siddown!*"

You sit on the edge of the open hatch. "Sometimes they fall down when I tell 'em," he says gruffly. "Now, what was bothering you?"

"Locking that kid up in a dark—"

"There isn't a kid. There isn't a dark cabin. There's no viewport on that side of the can because it's a hydrazine tank."

"But I—but we—but the—"

"Where do you come from?"

“Masolo, but what’s that to—”

“What did your mother and all the kids call you when you were a space-struck teenager?”

“Scampy. They’re all—*Scampy?*”

“That’s right.”

You cover your face. “By God. By God. I can remember now—thinking back in detail over my life—but it started *in the bus* that day I passed the entrance exams. What is it? Please—what is it?”

“Well, if you want me to be technical they call it Dell’s hypothesis. It was promulgated ’way back in the 1960’s by a lay analyst named Dudley Dell, who was, as I remember, the editor of a love-story magazine. He—”

“Please, Colonel,” you say. You’re in trouble.

“Okay, okay,” he says soothingly. “Well, up to that time psychologists, particularly analysts, were banging their heads against a stone wall in certain cases, and sometimes banging up the patient in the process. These were cases where infantile behavior, or infantile impulses, were running counter to adult environment and conditioning. Some of these primitive head-shrinkers got close to the real difficulty when they tried to have the patient act out this childish stuff. If a patient had eight-year-old wishes, the doc would say, “All right, say it—or do it—as if you were eight. This was—”

“Are you, sir, Colonel sir, going to tell me please the hell what’s with *me?*”

“I am,” he says calmly. “This was worse than useless in most cases because the ‘as if’ idea made the patient disbelieve in this active eight-year-old within him—a very viable, hard-fighting eight-year-old it was, too. So when behavior got more infantile, the doc would pull his beard, or his chin, and say, ‘Hm-hm, schizophrenia,’ thereby scaring the liverwurst out of the patient. Dell stopped all that.”

“Dell stopped all that,” you say, suffering.

“It was a little thing, like $E=MC^2$ or Newton’s apple, but oh, my, what happened!”

“Oh, my,” you say. “What happened?”

“Dell began directing his therapy to the infantile segment, treating it as a living, conscious organism. It responded excellently; it changed the face of psychoanalysis. Those who suffered from childish acts had the child who was acting that way

contacted and controlled. Now, in your case—you're not going to interrupt? Good. In your case, an extension of Dell's hypothesis was used. The sum total of your life up until you took your entrance examinations for Service training was arrested at age fifteen. A hypnotic barrier was erected so that you could have no access to any of this. You—all you cadets—literally start a new life here, with no references whatever to an earlier one. Your technical education has no referral factor to anything but itself. It makes you learn quickly and with uncluttered minds. You never miss your past because you carry a powerful hypnotic command not to think of it.

“When this was first tried, our men were left with memories including only their training, and permitted to go on indefinitely. Well, it didn't work. They were inhuman and un-sane. The conditioning of infants is far too important to the total human being to be wiped out that way. So we developed this new system, which has been used on you.

“But we discovered a peculiar thing. Even untrained adults—as opposed to the sharp division of pre- and post-entrance that you have—even untrained adults suffer to greater or less degree from an internal strife between childhood acceptances and the adult matrix. An exaggerated example would be a child's implicit belief in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, existing at the same time with the adult's total discrediting of the legends. The child (according to Dell, and to me) still exists and will fight like the very devil for survival, beliefs and all.

“The schism between you and Scampy was extreme; you were, in effect, born on different planets. To be a complete human being, you had to be rejoined; but to be rejoined successfully, you and Scampy had to make peace with one another. For Scampy it was not difficult—you, even in injustice and cruelty—were a real live heroimage. But you had a rather more stony path. But somewhere within yourself, somehow, you found an element of tolerance and empathy, and used it to bridge the gap. I may say,” the colonel adds severely, “that it takes a particularly fine kind of person to negotiate this difficult merger. You are not usual, Cadet; not usual at all.”

“Scampy,” you murmur. Impulsively you pull your shirt away from your chest and look down as if there were something hiding there. You look up. “But he—*talked* to me! Don't tell me you've

quietly invented a telepathic converter with band-pass filters.”

“Of course not. When the barrier was erected between you and Scampy, Scampy was conditioned to speak subvocally—that is, back in the throat and virtually without lip movement. You have a subminiature transmitter deposited surgically in your pharynx. The button on your bulkhead induced it to turn on. There had to be a button, you see; we couldn’t have you two speaking at the same time, as people in the same room invariably do.”

“I can’t get used to it. I can’t. I practically *saw* the boy! Listen, Colonel, can I keep my transmitter where it is, and have the same rig on my star ship?

“Who said you’re getting a star ship?” growls the colonel.

“Well, I thought—”

“Of *course* you’re getting a star ship.” He smiles, although I think it hurts his face. “You really want that transceiver set-up?”

“He’s a good kid.”

“Very well, Cadet. Commander. Dismissed.” He marches away. You look after him, shaking your head. Then you duck into the space can. You look at the bulkhead and at the button and at the scoring on the plate where you came *that* close to filling your hydrazine supply. You shudder.

“Hey,” you call softly. “Scamp!”

You push the button. You hear the carrier, then “I’m thirsty,” says Scampy.

You cut out of there and go down to the rec area and into the short-order bar. “A beer,” you say. “And put a lump of vanilla ice-cream in it. And straws.”

“You crazy?” says the man.

“No,” you say. “Oh, no.”

The Riddle of Ragnarok

JOY WAS NOT JOY in Asgard, for all the ale and the heady mead, the singing and the wild hard laughter. Clink and clatter and clash rang the arms; whip and whicker and thud the arrows. Sinews were tuned and toned and honed and hardened, and speech was mighty, and much of the measureless night belonged to the unearthly yielding of the Aesir goddesses, whose limbs were magic.

Here were the heroes of Earth, here the dazzle-winged Valkyrs; here in the halls of not-quite-forever they feasted and fought and found that which mortality is too brief and too fragile to grant.

The Aesir were made for joy, and the heroes had earned it, and their joys were builded of battle, and to battle they built. The battle they faced was the battle of Ragnarok; they would fight the Giants at Ragnarok; they would dare death at Ragnarok, and there they would die.

There was woe in the winds about Asgard. It was there like a bitterness in the drinking horns and it cut like cold. Hope lay frozen in the iron ground, moon-silver mantled the battlements like a winding-sheet, and against the stars the eagles floated, crying a harsh despair.

Heroes new-come to Valhalla heard of it, after their feast of honor, after they settled into the halls of the brave and looked about them and called this cold and mighty land their own. Sooner or later they asked and were told:

In the spring of the world when the mountains were new and the sea not salt, and Yggdrasil, tree of trees, but a blooming shrub, good Odin the sky-father, seeker of wisdom, descended a Well where dwelt Mimir the Wise. For a terrible price, the least part of which was one of his eyes, he was given knowledge unthinkable.

Odin learned the Runes, and the way to take from the Giants the skaldic mead which makes him who tastes it a poet. He learned the ways of wild things and the tricks of the halflings issuing from unspeakable unions between the Giants and the elf

folk. But of all he learned, the greatest and most terrible was the doom of Asgard: the certain victory of the Giants at Ragnarok.

Ever after, Odin was dedicated to forestalling that Day. Never again did he laugh, and only his silent wife Frigga knew completely his torment, and would silently brood over it and weep as she spun threads of gold. At the feasts, Odin presided but would not eat; two great wolves who lay at his feet had his share. He seemed never to join altogether in the company, though he always attended.

He would sit at the board in his golden palace Gladsheim with his wolves and his two ravens—Hugin, who was Thought, and Munin, who was Memory—who used to fly the world and return to him with news of all that happened in it; and he would ponder. And sometimes in his kirtle of gray and his dazzling blue hood he would walk the battlements or stand searching the sky.

Then he might call Tyr, war's god, or Thor, mightiest of them all, and give them tasks and duties, the purpose of which only he could know; these were the means of strengthening Asgard and delaying Ragnarok; but for what? for what? Asgard was doomed.

So it was that all colors in Asgard bore a tint of sadness, and a piece of every voice was mourning.

A sadness such as this was a wonder, but it was not the only wonder of Asgard. There was once a greater wonder than the wisdom of Odin or the strength of Thor: it was a thing more beautiful even than the one part of Asgard visible to mortal eyes, the rainbow bridge of Heimdall. The god Freyr, of the fruits of Earth, never served the world so well, the songs of Freyr herself lent less glory to the world than did the young god Balder.

In this atmosphere of awe and strangeness, of power and of powers, Balder moved with the confidence of a child in a loving home. His quality was a brightness—not like that of gold, or steel, but that of summer mornings, clean hair, first love, or high new notes from some seasoned lute. He was goodness and all kindness, and he was loved as no man nor no thing was ever loved before or since.

Balder was loved by god and hero alike, by Giant and elf and halfling, by the beasts, by the rocks and the very sky. It was said, in Balder's time, that only he could keep life in doomed Asgard; only such light as his could cancel the dark shadow of Ragnarok.

He shed his light wherever he went, and he went everywhere.

There lay in him no evil. He was welcomed, not only in Asgard, but in Jotunheim where the Giants dwelt. Hela, who ruled over the dead, found a smile—even she—for Balder, and in the blackest heart of the wilderness the bears sat like kittens and watched him pass.

As all things must somehow be matched and balanced, and since one of the Aesir could move freely in all realms, so there was the son of a Giant who drank and sang in Valhalla and Gladsheim when he willed; he was the laughing devil Loki. His eyes saw more than did the ravens of Odin, and his heart was a catacomb in which his loyalties and his loves could be led and lost.

Yet so quick was his wit and so hilarious his mischief that he might have been tolerated in doomed Asgard for these alone. But least of all things did he need to earn a place at the feasts of Gladsheim; he was sworn blood-brother to Odin in payment of an old partnership in the dawn of the world, and he could not be challenged.

So he went his way, careless; and about him was no fidelity nor anything which could be predicted, save his love for Balder: this, in the world, was as inescapable as sun, as frost, or any other pervading natural force.

Now on a terrible morning bright Balder woke wondering; he felt something which was, for him, most strange. He went to Frigga, his mother, and told her of it, and she listened and questioned him, and listened again, until she could tell him that what he felt was fear.

“Fear, Mother?” he said.

“Ay,” she said; “a kind of warning, a foreboding of danger.”

“I like it not, Mother.”

“Nor do I; I shall take it from thee.”

And take it she did.

What has never been done before or since, Frigga did; and if it were not that time is counted differently in Asgard than elsewhere, she would never have had time enough. All about Asgard she went, and among the Vanir, their neighbors; even through Jotunheim she walked, her mission opening gates before her like a magic key. She went also to the world of men, where, they say, she walked in the season between flower and frost, so that to this day Earth turns glorious for a time in memory of her,

and then the leaves fall and the trees feign death in memory of what followed.

And she went to places where dwelt neither gods nor men, nor Giants: places with names better not recalled.

And to everyone and every thing she met—to stones and sky and all who lived between them; to roots however deep and to high air-sucking blossoms; to the blood-bearers, warm and cold; to all with fangs, feathers or fins, hands or hooves; and to the wind, and to ice, and the sea; to all these she spoke, saying, “I bring tidings of evil: the unthinkable has happened, and Balder is touched by fear. Give me thy promise that, from thee, harm shall never come to him! That is all I ask of thee.”

Gladly then, gladly the high and the tall, the ancient, the once-living and the never-alive—all gave their bond; and not from them could harm come to Balder.

Back then to Asgard went Frigga, wearily. She noticed as she entered that high by the gate grew a tumble of glossy leaves and waxen white berries. She smiled then at the mistletoe, a green given to small and happy magics, and let it be, asking nothing of it. She sought out Balder and told him of what she had done, kissed his bright face and fell in a swoon.

She slept then, for a time long even in Asgard.

II

The news blew through stark Asgard like a warm wind, and the Aesir rejoiced. It was almost as if Ragnarok itself was removed from their thoughts—indeed, might not this be an inroad on their doom? For was not Balder of the Aesir? And were not the Aesir to die at Ragnarok? Yet now it was also true that no harm could come to Balder ...

Ragnarok receded, and even Odin nearly smiled. He had, however, the habit of pondering, and it was a trouble to him that Ragnarok could be, or that Balder might live through it, but not both. He buried this problem in a silent place within him and there worked on it mightily.

Balder was given a feast at Gladsheim, with such singing, such tries of arms, such mountains of succulent food and oceans of mead as were memorable even in Asgard.

And it came about that Balder found himself standing in the courtyard, laughing, while all about him the warriors of

Gladshheim and of Valhalla rushed at him with sword and mace, nocked and aimed their arrows, plunged and lunged at him with sword and lance.

The lances bent away from his shining body and the swords met a stony nothingness about him and bounced away ringing. The arrows rose to pass him, or slipped aside.

Above on her throne, Frigga sat watching. She was pale still from her ordeal and perhaps overwrought because of it. She kept touching her lips as if to stop their trembling, or perhaps to check some warning she knew was unneeded. This was Balder's pleasure and that of the gods and heroes about him; should she then call caution as if he were still her golden babe?

At length her eye fell upon Loki, who stood to the side, where Balder's blind brother Hodar sat, stony eyes wide and an eager smile on his mouth, trying with all his heart to know the details of Balder's joy. Summoning Loki, the god-queen waved her ladies back, and met the mischief-maker's bold gaze with a great pleading.

"I say this to thee myself, good Loki," she said quietly, "rather than send the message, that you may know it pains me. But I fear a mischief, and to think of mischief is to think of thee. No one loves Balder better than thee, and I believe it—yet I were happier with you gone from this hall. Indulge me, then ..."

Something indescribable and ugly moved in Loki's bright eyes, yet he smiled. "Since you ask, lady," he said and turned away, adding arrogantly over his shoulder, "but do not command me, I shall go."

He sprang down the steps and out into the night.

Frigga drew her shawl of tiny feathers close about her and shivered. Her ladies, cooing like a cote, closed about her. For long moments they whispered to her and to each other, until her great kindness asserted itself and she began, in turn, to soothe them in their concern.

"I am weary and foolish," she said; "none knows better than I how safe he is. Yet ..." She paused while the laughing god turned his back to a black-armored hero swinging a knobbed mace, and paled until the weapon slipped from the mailed hand in midstroke and crashed into the wall. "Yet will I be happier when this noisy childishness is done."

"But Lady Frigga—you missed nothing. Did not all the world

promise not to harm him?”

“Whatever I missed matters not,” Frigga said.

“Was there something, then?” asked a soft voice.

Frigga widened her eyes and turned to the woman, a stranger to her—but the halls were populous and this a great festival; folk had come from afar.

“Only the mistletoe,” said Frigga comfortingly, and the other ladies laughed at the idea of the gentle mistletoe as a danger.

Later, the woman was gone from her side, and was seen kneeling by blind Hoder, to help him, with her words, see the action, it seemed. And Frigga was pleased, for she saw the blind god’s head come up, and heard him laugh and cry out, “Balder! May I cast at thee?”

“Ay; I am fair game tonight!” cried Balder, and went to stand before his brother. “Here I am before thee; may fortune favor thy aim!” he said mockingly.

Then Hoder rose, and raised his arm. The woman was seen to turn him a little, better to face Balder squarely. Then Hoder hurled the sprig of mistletoe that he held, and it pierced Balder’s heart. Balder uttered one great cry, all astonishment and no fear, and he fell, and he died.

Dark Hela, ruler of the underworld Niflheim, took the murdered god hungrily, as one who had waited long aeons; and indeed she had. And when Balder’s second brother Hermod came there at Frigga’s bidding, to ransom Balder back, Hela yielded to this degree: that if every living thing would weep for him, she would surrender him, but if a single one would not mourn, then forever he would be Hela’s.

Back Hermod came with the word, and indeed it seemed a simple matter, for already all creation wept, the midges keened, and great splashes of color dripped from the rainbow bridge.

Yet in Jotunheim dwelt a Giantess, a strange, ageless creature steeped in sorcery and locked away from the world. All around her was weeping, even the Giants finding the death of this one enemy more than they could bear. Yet she would not weep for him nor anyone.

“Balder? Balder? Let the dead stay dead. Only dry tears will ye get from me. I had no good from this Balder, nor will I give him good.” And no other word would she say; and so was Balder’s death sealed.

And who killed him? Who killed the bright one who had no enemies, who had done no ill? Who was capable of an act so monstrous, so useless and cruel?

The heartsick Hoder testified that the mistletoe, which he examined afterward, smelt of Giant.

Who, being part Giant, had access to Gladsheim?

The woman who had given the mistletoe to Hoder and urged him to throw it had disappeared. Who was she? Or—was it a woman? Who was the greatest of all adepts at disguise; who had once fought a battle with the god Herindal in the shape of a seal?

The answer to all these questions was the same: *Loki, Loki Loki*.

And Loki was found outside, not impossibly far from the gate whence the mysterious woman-thing had fled, still sparkling with anger at having been asked to leave the hall. No one had seen him nor knew what he had done since he left.

So he was brought in, and chained. He said he was innocent and no more than that. Since the blood-brother of Odin could not be slain, he was lowered into a foul pit; and above him was suspended a frightful serpent in such wise that its venom dripped on him. And he was doomed to hang there until Ragnarok.

Then a pall settled over Asgard. Frigga, when she could, spun her golden threads and was silent. Great Odin brooded, Tyr and Thor, without guidance or orders, cast war and thunder about the earth as the casual spirit moved them.

Odin's twin ravens, Hugin, who was Thought, and Munin, who was Memory, quarreled bitterly over the fact that Munin had taken unto himself the duty of reporting to Odin the events of that evil night, while Hugin felt it was his privilege.

They went their separate ways, and though they might have been recalled by a word from Odin, he had not the word, for he cared no longer what happened in the world of men, or indeed in his own house.

So indeed it seemed true that Balder was needed in Asgard, lest the mere shadow of Ragnarok settle over the Aesir and crush them before there could be a battle at all.

This is the story which was told and retold for more than seven thousand years, as men count time. This, for all that while, was the complexion of Asgard. There, for a million moments measured by drops of scalding venom, hung Loki. And this is the prelude to the prelude of Ragnarok.

III

Munin flew high, and higher, turning one bright eye and then the other to the frozen land below. He flew because he must seek, he sought because he could not forget: his name was Memory.

He remembered the days when he perched on Odin's shoulder, waiting to be sent to the world of men, waiting for the long, companionable flight back during which he reported to his fellow all he had observed. He remembered the pleasant homecomings, the rasp of Hugin's voice as the other raven told Odin of what they had seen.

And he remembered the night of Balder's death, and Hugin's infuriating silence, and his own croakings and bleatings as he reported what had happened in and around the fateful hall.

He remembered Hugin's brilliant black stare as he spoke on and on, and the total anger of that insulted bird. He remembered the countless years of loneliness and idleness since, and he had had enough.

Between two crags he saw a dark fir, and in its lower branches he discerned a swaying lump just different enough in shape from a pine-cone to be what he was looking for.

He folded his wings and dropped closer. Ay: no pine-cone had moldy feathers aquiver in the wind, an ivory beak pressed to a moulted breast too sparse to hide it.

He fluttered to the branch, worked his claws about amongst the close-set needles until he found comfort, and settled.

"Hugin," he said. "Hugin."

Slowly the scaly eyelid on his side opened, just far enough to identify the speaker. It closed immediately.

"Parrot!" spat Hugin; it was his first word in seven thousand years, as men count time.

"Hugin, old comrade ..." Munin paused to collect himself, to remind himself that he had come here to renew his partnership with Hugin, and that he must under no circumstance let Hugin make him angry. "What has thee been doing?"

"What thee sees," said Hugin shortly, still not deigning to open his eyes.

"Ah, Hugin. Remember the times we've had, the—"

Hugin raised a warning claw.

"I remember nothing. I am not a foolscap, a storage shelf, a ... a macaw like thee. I am Hugin and my name is Thought."

"Ahh. And what has thee been thinking for seven thousand years, as men count time?"

"Of thine inexcusable perfidy, lovebird. What else?"

"But surely ... thought thee not of the old days, of the great flights we—"

"I've no truck with memories, as thee should know. There were more important things with which to concern myself."

"The death of Balder."

"I told thee," said Hugin in some irritation, and at last opening his eyes, "what it was I thought about."

"About *me*? About what I did that night, when thee closed thine eyes and had nought to say, with the very world cracking about our heads?"

"I had to *think*!"

Munin recognized, slowly, that Thought without Memory had indeed done nothing but turn over and over that last insult. For the first time he felt a great welling pity for his comrade.

"All those years ... thinking about me," he said. "Ah, Hugin!"

"It was a great evil thee did me, Munin," said the other plaintively.

"Ay, it was," said Munin with some hypocrisy, which he immediately compounded with "I am a simple soul, friend Hugin, and do not understand exactly what the evil was, though I grant thee it was enormous."

"Thee conveyed those events ... whatever they were ... out of Memory, without Thought! This was never our way, Munin!"

"Ah, that I know. That I knew then, but never understood. Before that night, we had long hours of flight for your thinking. In the press of circumstance, when Balder died, there was time to speak only as things occurred. Tell me, Hugin, is not the relation of things exactly as seen—is that not speaking the truth? That is all I did."

"Ay, it is the truth, just as a mound of bricks is a mansion. Truths must be arranged, Munin."

"And arranged, they are a different thing?"

"They can be used for a different purpose."

"I am a simple soul," Munin said again. "Could thee demonstrate the point for me, in such a way that I will understand and not insult thee again?—for I miss thee sore, Hugin," he added with a rush.

He saw Hugin softening visibly, and pressed his advantage. "I'll tell thee exactly what I reported to Odin that night. If thought can make of these events a total different from what memory itself yields, I shall believe thee truly, and never insult thee again."

"Agreed. And will thee then fly back with me to Odin and behave thyself properly, henceforth leaving the final reports to me?"

"Gladly."

"Then tell me these events from the beginning. You understand that I have been without memory for some while now."

"But never again!" said Munin heartily, and launched into an account of the events surrounding the death of Balder, from the god's awakening with the strange fear, to the imprisonment of Loki. "Thus are the guilty found and justly punished!" he finished triumphantly. "What has Thought to say on this?"

"Only that Loki is not guilty."

Munin stared at him in amazement. "I don't see that!"

"Don't see! Don't see!" jeered Hugin. "Know, parakeet, that thy two eyes are petty instruments which, at their best, are purblind. I have in here," he croaked loudly, overcoming Munin's approaching interruption, "a third eye which sees what you do not. *That* is what thought is for!"

"It cannot make me see what it sees," said Munin ruefully.

"It can in time," said Hugin. He sounded alive and in inexplicably high humor. "Come!" and before the puzzled Munin knew what was happening, he flapped skyward.

"Where are we going?"

"To Jotunheim."

"But Loki's in Gladsheim—or under it."

"Ay, but if he's innocent, some Giant is guilty, and Jotunheim's the place for Giants."

"But-but-but ... thee don't *know* Loki's not guilty!"

"The ways of thought," said Hugin didactically, "are not those of observation and reporting. Thought is not limited to facts; facts are, thee will remember, but the bricks used to fill in a thinker's design."

And until they reached Jotunheim, he would say no more.

IV

As they sailed over the low, wide, forbidding city, Hugin asked,

"The Giantess—she who refused to weep for Balder. Does thee know her name, and where she dwells?"

"Of course. She is Borga, a recluse and a small sorceress, and she dwells in yonder spire. But there is no connection, Hugin, between her and Balder or even Loki. I think—"

"I think," said Hugin loftily, and led the way to the spire. They alighted on the roof, and Hugin said, "Ravens are great mimics, and among ravens, thee has special talent, no? Can thee imitate the voice of Loki?"

"That I can, to frighten Loki himself if I choose," said Munin, most startlingly in Loki's exact tone.

Hugin cocked his weather-beaten head to one side and said, also in Loki's voice, "This is but a poor imitation of thy talent, friend, but would it serve to baffle a Giant?"

"It baffles me," said Munin, awed.

"I thank thee for the lesson, then," said Hugin. His eyes sparkled in a way new to his fellow. "Now lead the way in some secret fashion which you, oh, Mimir among birds, surely know in this place, so that we may come upon the lady in her chamber unobserved."

Speechless with astounded pleasure, Munin crept to the crooked eave and along it to an odorous smoke-hole. Cautiously he put his head inside, and finding the firebed cold, gestured to Hugin.

Hugin passed him, whispering "*Silence!*" and inched into the room.

It was an almost circular turret room, fitted out as a combination bedroom and alchemical laboratory. Around it ran shelves filled with an inconceivable clutter of bins, bottles and bags, boxes, books and basins.

On the bed lay Borga, and Hugin croaked—but silently—in surprise. For by human standards she was exquisite; even among the Aesir she would have passed as attractive. Nay, as wondrously fair.

She was hardly the withered crone Hugin had expected. Turning from her, he edged along the shelf to which he had hopped. Coming to a large, long-necked flask which lay on its side, empty, he considered it critically, shifted it slightly so that its open mouth and neck almost paralleled the smooth wall. Then he thrust his beak into the flask, finding that there was just room

for his jaws to open comfortably.

To do this, he had to lie almost on his side. He gestured with one claw for Munin to do likewise. Then, with an effect that made Munin's feathers all stand on end, he uttered a protracted and horrible groan, in an exact mimicry of Loki's voice. The sound of it as it emerged from the flask was most extraordinary. The wall's curvature made it seem to come from everywhere at once.

Borga left her bed in a way which challenged description. Levitation, the power of which she certainly possessed, seemed to play no part in it, but she came straight upward while still flat on her back. She rose in the air, fell back, bounced once, and landed cowering at the far side of the chamber. Her head whipped from side to side, as if she were afraid to leave it facing in one direction for more than the smallest part of a second.

"Wh-who ... wh-what's that?" she quavered.

Hugin moaned again, and the Giantess seemed to shrink into herself.

Again she cast about wildly. "Where—Art here?"

"Nay; in Gladsheim," Hugin intoned. He then made a spattering-hissing sound, which was like hot fat dropping into a fire, followed by an agonized gasp. "Ai-ee, it burns ... *it burns* ..."

"By what magic—"

"How do I speak to thee? Largely through the holes in thy conscience, little sorceress. *Very* little sorceress," Hugin added scornfully. "I cannot come to thee; would that I could."

From that she seemed to take great courage. She rose and composed herself, and said in a voice more clear, "I have heard of thy torment, Loki, and I am sorry it is so extensive. But thee cannot deny that thee led thyself into it."

"But I am innocent!"

"To a degree," said Borga, and Munin, his awe renewed, nodded at Hugin. "But considering thy manifold sins, and the many that went unpunished, thee cannot claim complete injustice. And no one will believe thee! Tell me, whose fault is that, friend liar?" Her tone became increasingly confident and mocking. "Thee has interrupted my rest, good Loki. Why?"

"To ... to tell thee ..." Again that shocking hiss, and the gasp. "Did thee never love me, Borga?"

Now she laughed. It was not pleasant. "Well thee knows! I

spurned thee always! Thee wanted not me. Thee wanted an amusement, something different—a sorceress who was a daughter of the Giant vizier.”

Loki’s voice said, slyly, “*Always?*”

She began to speak, then stopped, pale. “What do thee mean?”

Hugin laughed. It was chilling. “Did thee enjoy Balder?”

“How dare ...” and then she was overcome by what seemed to be curiosity. “How did you know?”

“What let thee think Balder would notice such as thee?” Hugin jeered harshly. “Stupid! to lull thyself into believing Balder would court and cozen and bargain for such coarse flesh as thine! The veriest sparrow could have told thee about guileless Balder, were it not for thy blinding conceit!”

“But he did! He did!” she wailed. “And he made my head swim so ... and he came so close, and then put me by and asked that of me that no Giant must ever share with the Aesir ... and I refused, and closer again he came ... and he said he loved ... and I, I was lost, and I told him the Great Secret of Mimir, and then he took me, laughing ...”

She burst into a wild weeping, which was drowned out by a cascade of coarse laughter, echoing round and round the room.

While it still echoed, Hugin snatched out his beak and whispered to Munin, “Can thee mimic Balder?”

“Ay,” said Munin, “but ’twould be a desecration!”

“Desecrate away, friend parrot. We have this pullet’s neck on the block.”

“What must I say?”

“Some Aesir love-making nonsense.”

Munin put his beak into the jar, and Balder’s voice, hollowed by the resonant glass, rang out: “Beloved, thy limbs glow, nay, they dazzle me. Hide thyself in mine arms quickly. I die, I wither away standing so near the sun....”

“*Balder!*” she shrieked.

On the second syllable Hugin had pulled Munin’s beak out and thrust in his own, and was again making that jarring, jeering laughter. “Na, na, not Balder; Loki, who swore to have thee whether thee’d have him or not. Loki, who fought Herindal in the shape of a seal. Loki, who can take any shape he chooses—ay, and any sorceress! It was I, I, Loki ye bedded with, thinking it was Balder—ay, and ye enjoyed it, crone!

"It was I who stole thy Secret of Secrets, not Balder. And when next thee saw Balder, thee went to him mouthing and simpering, and thee took his honest innocence as a spurning. And for that thee killed him, that and for fear that he'd tell your Secret! Do you see what thee've done, thou thick-witted slut? Thee killed bright Balder for bedding thee when he did not; for spurning thee which he did not; and for possessing a Secret which thee never told him!"

She stumbled across to the bed and crouched on the edge of it, gasping as if she had been whipped. Slowly, then, she looked up, and she had a crooked smile on her face. She forced words out between her teeth:

"Then, Loki, for the crime I have done, I am free, and thee hang in the pit. For what thee led me to do, all the world accuses thee. Hang there, then; thy punishment is just!"

Hugin pulled out his beak and almost comically scratched his head with his claw.

Munin whispered, "What is this Secret?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I must think." He closed his eyes tight.

Munin was painfully reminded of the night Balder was killed, when Hugin went into this kind of trance and would say nothing until he had thought it all out. He glanced down. Borga the sorceress was waiting, breathing heavily.

Abruptly Hugin slid his beak into the jar again, and Loki's ghostly tones emerged. "The Secret ..."

For a moment Borga was absolutely still. Then she flung her head up. "What of the Secret?"

Hugin said nothing.

Borga whimpered, "Thee ... thee haven't told the Aesir?"

Hugin intoned, "Think thee I have?"

"No," she whispered, "No, we ... we would know. This is very ... brave," she said with difficulty. "If thee told, they'd free thee."

"And come for thee," Hugin hazarded.

"Ay." She shivered. "If the Giants leave anything of me."

"So which is it to be, Borga?"

"I don't ... understand."

Munin saw Hugin's eyes squeeze tight shut for a moment. Then

he said, "I'll draw thee a problem, and thee may tell me if it is correctly stated. Stay in thy chamber for as long as thy safety lasts, and I shall assuredly tell the Aesir all I know. When the Giants hear of it they will kill thee. Or—"

"No!" she cried.

"Or," he went on relentlessly, "come to Gladsheim and confess to Odin that thee murdered Balder. I shall be freed and banished and thee will die."

"Either way, I die!"

"Ay. But there is this difference. Free me, and the Aesir never know the Secret. They will be content with their murderer. At least thee can make amends for thy stupidity without damage to the Giants."

She was silent a long time. Then she said, "Devil!" in a way which must have hurt her throat. After that, "When ... when must I—"

"It will take thee three days to reach Gladsheim. On the fourth dawn from tomorrow's, I shall tell Odin the Secret or I shall greet thee. Choose."

She clutched her hands tight against her face for a moment, and then lowered them. She said calmly, "I will go, then."

She is brave, thought Munin. She is foolish and in some ways stupid, but she is brave.

But the Secret—the Secret; what of that? Munin looked anxiously at Hugin.

Hugin's eyes were screwed shut again. At length he said, in Loki's voice, "And when I am free, how can thee be sure I will not tell the Aesir our little Secret after all?"

"Thee wouldn't! Thy fealty's with us! Thee's a Giant!"

"Only half, Borga. Thee'll just have to trust me."

"Ay," she said, her expression cloaked, but her eyes hot, "we'll trust thee."

"Then farewell, Borga." And suddenly, in a strained tone, "*I have suffered enough!*"

Ay, thought Munin, that would be Loki's way. Always a flash of drama. He drew Hugin close. "What of the Secret? Can we learn it?"

In answer, Hugin pointed. Borga had moved to a table; she was drawing out a sheet of foolscap, a quill, ink. She sat down to write.

"To Omir, her father the Giant vizier," Munin whispered. With a bird's eye and more memories than the human race, he could read it easily. *"This is goodbye, father, and a wish that I could be mourned, but I cannot. Know then that I was tricked by Loki in ways I am too ashamed to write here; that through this I, yes, I, father, killed Balder; and that I have done the greatest evil of all in revealing to Loki the Secret of Mimir. I go now to Gladsheim to die for the useless murder, and Loki will be freed. See that he dies, for he cannot be trusted. Do not pursue me nor change this plan in any particular, lest the Giants lose the field at Ragnarok."*

"Shall we take the paper?" whispered Munin when she had done.

"We need it not. Come." Hugin seemed about to burst with joy.

V

Silently they crept along the shelf to the fire hole and squirmed through it to the brooding night of Jotunheim. Together they took wing.

Ah, like the old days; to Odin, together! thought Munin joyfully.

"Thee have made thy point, good Hugin," he said, when they were over halfling country. "The facts I had never added up to the yield of your thought. How? How could you do it?"

"By flights above fact," said Hugin, "and the gathering of the facts below ... Now, when first thee told me the story of Balder's death, thought took me to a path wherein Loki, though an instrument, was not actually guilty. Following this, I could assume that if Loki were innocent, the strange woman at the feast was not Loki disguised, but a stranger.

"What kind of stranger? A Giant, bearing some small charm to keep us from detecting her. You will, friend Munin, of course remember that she did not appear at the feast until Loki was cast out. He would have detected her, spell or no spell, half-Giant that he is. She stayed hidden, probably in the crowd.

"And we know, too, that she arrived to find Balder apparently invulnerable, and that she skilfully pressed Frigga to reveal her oversight with the mistletoe. The rest of this woman's work was seen by all."

"But," Munin objected, "how did thee conclude it was truly a woman?"

"Because at the outset it seemed a woman's crime. If a man is

killed and has no known enemies, and especially if there is no obvious gain from his death, then the heart is involved somewhere.

“Balder, however, was not as other men, other gods. If he spurned anyone, it was in innocence and without intent, and the whole world knew that. Hence his death had to be for two reasons—because of a woman’s scorn, and because of something else. It is easy to visualize a smitten lady killing herself over Balder; it is inconceivable that she would kill Balder unless something else were involved.”

“What led thee to Borga?”

“The noisiest clue of all, Munin. It was she alone who would not weep for him. This is one thing all Asgard overlooked because suspicion of Loki was so strong—just as all Asgard has forgotten that Loki wept.

“So once we were led to Borga, we had merely to let her conscience work in our favor. The voice of Loki in her room spoke never from knowledge, save what she supplied. And so we forced her to confess, and further, to give herself up.”

“Thee, not we,” said Munin reverently. “And what of the Secret?”

“We do not know it completely, but we know enough. Borga wrote, ... *lest the Giants lose at Ragnarok*. And that is sufficient, from what thee’ve told me—it is word straight from the heart of the Giant domain that such a thing is possible, the first since Odin entered the Well of Mimir the Wise, in the dawn of time.”

“Mimir ... he is a Giant!” cried Munin, fluttering excitedly. “And it must be one false seed he slipped amongst the treasures he gave Odin! And Odin—good Odin—never doubted it!”

“As was said by our false Loki,” chuckled Hugin, “*I have suffered enough!*” We shall take a weight from the sky-father, friend Munin. Perhaps he will wish to confront Mimir with the lie—that great tragic lie that the Giants must win the field at Ragnarok. But thought tells me he need not: Fate never dictated the doom of Asgard.”

“Will Asgard be victorious then?”

“The Aesir will win if they fight best, and that is all they would ever wish.”

Before them spread the frontiers of Asgard. Happily they flew—Munin, who bore seven thousand years of doom and mourning,

seeing now a return to the great days, and Hugin, who bothered himself not with memories, content that hereafter he would be the one to speak to the sky-father.

* * *

Joy is now joy in Asgard, with its ale and its heady mead, the singing and the wild hard laughter. Clink and clatter and clash ring the arms; whip and whicker and thud, the arrows. Sinews are tuned and toned and honed and hardened, and speech is mighty, and much of the measureless night belongs to the unearthly yielding of the Aesir goddesses, whose limbs are magic.

Here are the heroes of Earth, here the dazzle-winged Valkyrs; here in the halls of forever they feast and fight and find that which mortality is too brief and too fragile to grant.

The Aesir are made for joy and the heroes have earned it, and their joys are builded of battle, and to battle they build. The battle they face is the battle of Ragnarok. They will fight the Giants at Ragnarok. They will dare death at Ragnarok ...

... and there *they need not die!*

Twink

FEELING NUMB, I put the phone down. I've got to get out of here, I thought. I've got to go ask old Frozen Face. I've got to get home.

But there was the old man, just that minute coming out of his office. For the first time, I was glad he'd put my desk out there in front of the golden-oak slab of his door, like a welcome mat. I looked up at him and I guess I looked anxious.

He stopped beside me. "Something wrong?"

I wet my lips, but I couldn't say anything. Stupid! Why shouldn't I be able to say *I've got to get out of here!*

"The kid?"

"Yes," I said. "We have to take her in this afternoon."

"Well, get out of here," he said brusquely.

I stood up. I couldn't look at him. "Thanks."

"Shaddap," he said gruffly. "Call up if you need anything."

"I won't need anything." Except courage. Faith, if you like. And whatever kind of hypocrisy it takes to conceal from a child how scared you are.

I reached for my hat. Old Frozen Face just stood there. I looked back from the outer door and he was still there, staring at the place where I'd been.

I almost yelled at him some explosive, blathering series of syllables that would in some way explain to him that I'm not a freak; look at the creases in my blue pants; look at my shoeshine, just the same as yours; look how my hairline's receding—look, look, I've got heartburn and lumps in my throat!

At the same time, I wanted to yell something else, something about, yes, you were kind to me because you know what's with me, with my kid; but you can't know how it is. With you, I'm once removed from anything you could feel, like the Hundred Neediest Cases in the newspaper at Christmas. You believe it, sure, but you can't know how it is.

So with one inner voice saying I'm what you are and another saying You can't know how it is, I let them crash together and silence one another, and said nothing, but made the frosted glass

door swing shut and walked over to the elevators.

I had to wait and that seemed wrong. I looked at the indicators, and saw that all of the cars were running, and that seemed wrong, too. Everything else ought to stop except one car for me and it ought to be here now! I stood there realizing how irrational all this was, but fuming anyway.

Behind me, I heard *thunk-pat, thunk-pat*, and from the corner of my eye saw it was Bernie Pitt on his crutches. I turned very slightly so my back was to him. Bernie is a very nice guy, but I just didn't want to talk to anybody. It was as if talking to somebody would slow up the elevator.

I hoped he hadn't noticed my turning away like that. Then I found I could see his reflection in the polished gray-green marble of the wall by the elevator. He was looking at me; I could see his face tilt as he glanced down at the hat I was twisting in my hands. Then it tipped up and back a little as he studied the tops of the doors, the way a man does when he wants to look as if he's absorbed in his own thoughts. So he's seen that hat, at ten in the morning, and that meant I was going out, and he knew all about me and Twink and the accident, and was being considerate.

Old Frozen Face was being considerate, too. Old Frozen Face always did the correctly considerate thing. Like hiring Bernie, who was a cripple.

I hated myself for thinking that.

It made me hate Bernie. I glared at his reflection. Just then, one of the elevator doors across the corridor rolled open and I jumped and spun.

"Up!" said the operator.

Bernie stumped into it without looking at me. The door closed. I wished I had a rock to throw at it.

I tried hard to get hold of myself. I knew what was happening. Scare a man badly enough, and then make the thing he fears diffuse and unreachable, and he'll lash out indiscriminately at everything and everyone. Well, lash away, boy, I told myself, and get it out of your stinking small-minded system before you get home.

"Down?" the operator asked.

Shouldering into the car, I felt I had a right to be sore at the operator for taking so long. The elevator was full of intruders and the descent took forever, and for a moment I got so mad, I swear

I could have hunched my shoulders and sprayed them all with adrenalin. Then the doors opened again and there was the lobby like a part of all outdoors, and the offices upstairs no longer contained or confined me, and their people no longer intruded.

I scurried down the steps and along the concourse to the interurban station, trusting my feet and letting the rest of me fly along with the eager aimlessness of a peace-dove released at a school pageant.

How can there be any unreality in your cosmos? I asked myself. The day *Twink* goes to the hospital—that's *today*; it's here. It's been a real thing all this time, for all it was in the future; it was more real than most other things in the world. And now it's come and you're walking underwater, seeing through murk.

But the whole world's helping, too. Nothing is so unreal to the commuter as a commuter's station at ten in the morning. The trains, lying in these echoing acres, look like great eviscerated larvae. The funereal train crew, gossiping as if work were done, as if it weren't their job to get me home before the sawbones went to work on my little girl.

I went to them. "Baytown?"

They looked at me, a conductor, a motorman, a platform man. They were different sizes and shapes, but their faces were all the same gray, and contained the same damnable sense of the fitness of things. They were in a place that belonged to them, doing the right thing at the right time in it. They were steady and sober and absolutely at the service of commuters-by-the-ton, but a man outbound at ten in the morning, though tolerable, could hardly be served. He wasn't what they were there for.

I went into the train and sat down and looked at my watch. Four minutes. They were going to make me wait four minutes.

I sat in an empty car and looked at the glare of yellow woven plastic pretending to be rattan, steel panels pretending to be wood, and the advertising signs. There were three kinds of signs: the imperatives, which said Buy and Drink and Use; the comparatives, which said Better, Richer, Finer (and never stated what they were better and richer and finer than); and the nominatives, which stupidly and without explanation proclaimed a name.

I snorted at them all and reached for a paper someone had left on a nearby seat. If its previous owner had been there, I think I'd

have punched him right in the mouth. I've always respected books and I've always felt a paper is a sort of book. This character had put the middle section in upside down, folded some sheets back on themselves and away from the centerline, so that page covers skewed and flopped all around, and he had generally churned up and mutilated the dead white body before discarding it.

Growling, I began to put it back together again.

CHEERFUL TONY WEAKER
Doomed Child Sinking. Gifts
and Cards Pouring In for
Early Birthday

NEW YORK, June 25 (AP)—1973's Child of the Year, five-year-old Tony Marshall, has been placed under oxygen at Memorial Hospital, while a staff of top cancer specialists stand a twenty-four-hour watch at his bedside. Hope that he will live to see his sixth birthday in August has faded.

The boy, whose famous smile made him known from coast to coast as Cheerful Tony, is suffering from advanced leukemia.

Angrily, I hurled the paper away from me. It came to pieces in midair and fluttered to the floor, to lie there accusingly and stare at me. I swore and got up and gathered it together and crammed it out of sight on the seat ahead of mine.

"Cheerful Tony," I muttered. Some convolution of the face muscles, some accident of the dental arch, a trick of the light and the fortuitous presence of a news photographer as lucky as the guy who got the flag-raising at Iwo—put 'em all together and you've got a national hero. What good did it do to anyone to read about Cheerful Tony or to write about it? What good did it do Tony?

For an ugly moment, I wished I could trade places with Tony's father. All he had to worry about was cancer—nice, certain cancer—and once it was finished, that would be the end of it.

But I didn't envy him the publicity, and for the hundred thousandth time, I thanked the Powers that so few people knew about Twink.

The doors slid shut and the train started. I let go a sigh of relief and hunched back in my seat, wondering how to make the time go faster. Not the time; the train. I pushed my feet uselessly against the legs of the next seat, made a calm and childish calculation of what I was doing (forty pounds foot-pressure forward, forty pounds shoulder-pressure backward—equals zero) and sat up feeling like a fool. I began to look at the ads again.

Imperative, comparative, nominative.

Maybe my technique had been wrong all along. Maybe I should have used nothing but advertising tactics on Twink the whole time. After all, those were tested methods, with more than a century of proof behind them

“Relax with oxygen,” I should have told her. “Live,” I should have told her, twelve times a minute, in the best imperative mood. “Live ... live.” And, “Don’t struggle. Let the doctor work. It will be easier.” (Than what?) And, of course, the pervasive, institutional nominative: “Twink. Everybody knows Twink. Everybody loves Twink.” Until she believes it all....

The anger, which had changed to hysteria, converted itself now into crawling depression. It descended on me like the shadow of some great reptile, something that moved slowly and implacably and without human understanding. I felt utterly alone. I was different. Apart. More apart than Bernie, who had left half a leg in Formosa. More than Sue Gaskell, who was the only Negro in the copy department—by God, another “kindness” of old Frozen Face.

Why couldn’t someone (besides Twink) share this with me? Even Doris couldn’t. Doris loved me; she ate with me, slept with me, worried and hoped with me, but this thing with Twink was something she couldn’t share. She just wasn’t equipped for it. Sometimes I wondered how she held still for that. This might go on for years ... if Twink lived at all ... Twink and I sharing a thing that Doris could never know, even being Twink’s mother.

Suddenly I found someone else to be mad at and the depression lifted enough to let it in. You guys, I thought, you helpful people who put welded track on these roadbeds, who designed pneumatic dampers and cushioned wheels for the trains—did it ever occur to you that a man might want something to listen to in a train in 1973? Twenty years ago, I could have listened to the

wheels and I could have made up a song to go along with them; *blippety-clak, blippety-clak*.

Blippety-clink, poor little Twink, don't let her die—

All right, fellows—on second thought, you can have your welded rails.

“Baytown,” said the annunciator in a cultured voice, and deceleration helped me up out of the seat.

I went to the door and was through it before it had slid all the way open, shot down the platform while fumbling for my commuter's plate, missed the scanner slot with it and skinned my knuckles, dropped the plate, picked it up, got it into the slot, waited forever—well, three seconds—while it scanned, punched and slid out my receipt.

I was just about to blow a fuse because there was no taxi, but there was. I couldn't bark my address because the driver knew it, and I couldn't wave bribes at him because he was paid by the development, and anyway his turbines had a governor to keep him from speeding as fast as I wanted. All I could do was huddle on the cushion and bite the ball of my thumb.

The house was very quiet. For some reason, I had expected to find them in the nursery, but there wasn't a sound from there. I found Doris stretched out on the settee in the den, looking drowsy.

“Doris!”

“Shh. 'Lo. Twink's asleep.”

I ran to her. “Is she ... do you ... are you ...”

She rumbled my hair. “Shhh,” she said again. “My goodness, it's going to be all right.”

I leaned very close and whispered, “Scared. I'm scared.”

“I'm scared, too,” she said reasonably, “but I'm not going to go all to pieces.”

I knelt there, soaking up a kind of strength, a kind of peace from her. “Sorry, darling. I've been—” I shuddered. “On the train, I was reading about Cheerful Tony. I was thinking how they'd do the same thing with us, if they knew.”

“Only more.” She half-laughed. “All that mail, all those reporters, newsreel men. All that glory. All that—noise.”

We listened together to the morning silence. It was the first time since she'd phoned me that I'd noticed how lovely the day

was.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?"

"For not telling them. For being—well, for just being; I guess that's what I'm trying to say. And for Twink."

"For *Twink*?"

"Of course. She's my little girl. If it hadn't been for you, I'd never have known her."

"I think the way motherhood makes people crazy is one of the nicest things around," I said.

She answered, but with her eyes. Then she said, "We have to be there at noon."

I looked at my watch, leaped wildly to my feet, turned left, turned right.

Doris openly laughed at me. "How long does it take to get to the hospital?" she asked.

"Well, ten minutes, but we have to ... don't we have to, uh?"

"No, we don't. We have more than an hour. Sit down and help me be quiet. Want something to eat before we go?"

"No. God, no. Shall I fix—"

"Not for me."

"Oh," Slowly I sat down again.

She giggled. "You're funny."

"Yeah."

"Have any trouble getting away?" She was making talk, I knew, but I went right along with it.

"Matter of fact, no," I said. "Old Frozen Face took one look at me after you called, and chased me out."

"He's so wonderful.... Honey! Don't call him that!"

I growled something wordless. "He makes me mad."

"After all he's done?"

"Yes, after all he's done," I said irritably.

Because of all he's done, I think. All my life, I'm a misfit for one reason or another; then, in college, they found out this thing about me and I worked my way through being a laboratory curiosity. I got into the papers. Not too much—just enough to keep me from getting any decent job after I graduated. Except with Frozen Face, of course. I didn't apply; he wrote me. He hired all his people that way. People with half a leg. Blind people in Personnel. Ex-cons who couldn't get started.

At first, it looked as if his people had escaped the things that hung over them—thanks to him. Then, after a while, you began to realize that you wouldn't be working there if you didn't have something wrong with you. It was like starving all your life until you found you could be well fed and taken care of till the day you died—in a leprosarium.

But I said, "Sorry, Doris. Just naturally ungrateful, I guess ... Twink's waking up."

"Oh, dear! I thought she might sleep until—"

"Shh."

Ever since the accident (I'd turned the car over; they say you can't do that with any car later than 1970, but I'm the guy), Twink had terrified me every time she woke up. She'd come out of the normal sleep of a normal baby and enter a frightening stillness, a cessation of everything but life itself. It was, I suppose, coma; but I'd lived with seven weeks of it once, and even now the momentary passage through it, from sleep to waking, was so loaded with terror and guilt for me that it was all I could take. And when you add to that the fact that I had to hide it, that above all else I had to be strength to her, and comfort, as she awoke—

Then it was over; she was awake, confused, dimly happy.

"Hi, baby. How's my Twink?"

Doris, tense on the couch, not breathing, waiting—

"It's all right. Twink's all right," I said.

"Well, of course!"

I shot Doris a look. There wasn't a hairline crack in that enamel of hers, but it suddenly occurred to me that it was past time for me to stop using her as the pillar of strength around here. I bent and kissed her and said (making it sound like a joke, because I knew she'd prefer it that way), "Okay, honey; from here on, you can scream curses."

"I'll just do that," she said gratefully.

Did the accident have anything directly to do with it or was it just me? Champlain (yes, *the* Champlain, who took up where Rhine left off) had a number of theories about it. The most likely one was that when my peculiar equipment got stirred up enough in the crash and for that awful hour afterward, I sent such a surge of empathy at Twink that I created a response. You can call it

telepathy if you like—Champlain did—but I don't like the sound of that. Of course, I'm biased. You can take your extrasensoria, all of them, and—well, just take 'em and leave me be.

It may be that I was better equipped than the next guy to adjust to this, having lived for some eight years with the mild notoriety of being the boy who never scored less than 88 on the Rhine cards. But personally, constitutionally, I never was meant to be different from other people. What I mean is that my useless ability (I don't regard it as a talent and I won't call it a gift) didn't have to make any difference to anyone. I could be just as good a short-order cook, just as bad a ticket-taker, as anyone else. But I was never given the chance of living like a human being.

I could stick around the parapsychology laboratories, earning a living like an ape in the zoo (and not much of a living at that; even in this enlightened era, there isn't a rich parapsychologist), or I could go out and get a job. And the way my dark past followed me, you'd think I was wearing a Flying Saucer for a halo. "Oh, yes—you're the mind-reading fellow." You know what that can do to your prospects?

Usually I didn't get the job. Once I was hired though they knew. Twice I landed jobs and they found out later. Each time there was someone who went to the boss, seniority and all, and said, "Look, it's him or me." And guess who got the pink slip.

Would you work every day with somebody who could read your mind? Who hasn't got secrets? Whose life really is an open book? I can tell you, I wouldn't work next to someone like that, yet I'm about as inoffensive as they come. And what was driving me out of my head—and I was two-thirds out when I met Doris and then Frozen Face—was that everyone thought I could read minds and I *can't*!

But Doris, who had heard of me even before she met me, never mentioned it. First she was nice to be with, and then I had to be with her, and then I came to a big, fat, soul-searching decision and confessed All to her one night, and she kissed me on the end of the nose and said she'd known about it all along and it didn't matter; and if I said I couldn't read minds but was only good at guessing Rhine cards, why, she believed me; and if I ever did learn to read minds, she wished I'd hurry up and read hers, because she was getting awfully impatient. After that, I'd have married her if she looked like a gila monster. Actually she looked

like the Tenniel Alice-in-Wonderland, only with curly hair.

When I came up for breath from that interchange, I liked people a hell of a lot more than I ever had before. I guess that's another way of saying I liked myself some, at last.

Then along came the letter from Frozen Face, and Twink came up, and the accident happened.

And after the accident, the nightmare ability to dip down into the living silence that was Twink now, an unstirring something that couldn't see or speak or hear, something that was dreadfully hurt and just hovering, barely alive. My kid. And after about seven weeks, a movement, a weak tensing. It was the faintest possible echo of fear, and always a retreat from it that shoved the little thing close to dying again. Then there would be the silence again, and the stirring, and the fear and retreat.

Why I tried, how I thought to try, I don't know, but I did what I could each time to reassure her. I would tense till I ached and say, *It's all right, honey, don't be afraid, it's all over now.* And I hoped it helped her, and then I thought it did, and then one night I knew it did, because I saw the tension coming and stopped it, and there was a different kind of silence, like sleeping, not like coma.

After that, she got better fast, and I took hold of the slim hope that she might one day see and run and climb like other kids, hear music, go to school ...

She had to, she *had* to, or I was a murderer. I was worse than that. Your out-and-out murderer knows what he's doing. More likely than not, he does it to get something, for profit.

But me—want to know what I did?

We'd been out for a drive in our shiny new car—well, it was second-hand, but the newest one I'd ever owned—and I wanted to get a couple of cartons of cigarettes before we crossed the state line, to save—guess!—a few cents tax. It was a six-lane road, three each way. I was in my middle lane.

Doris pointed at a big neon sign. "There's a place!"

I hauled the wheel over and shot straight across the right-hand lane. The truck just nipped the rear fender and over we went.

For six cents. Come to think of it, I never did buy the cigarettes, so I can't even claim that.

There's your superman, "wild talents" and all. A goddam highway boob.

Doris and Twink went to the hospital, bleeding and bleeding, then lying for days, waxy, doll-like, and came out, back to me, saying it wasn't my fault it wasn't my fault ... God! And Twink as good as dead.

There was a reception committee waiting for us—two big names in medicine, McClintock and Zein—and, of course, Champlain. Busy boy. He wouldn't miss this for the world. But, thank heavens, no press.

"Come on, I want to talk to you," said Champlain, big and breezy as ever, looking like the world's least likely suspect as a parapsychologist. I never did like Champlain, but he was the only person in the world besides Doris I could really talk to. At the moment, I wished I hadn't ever talked to him. Especially about Twink. But he knew and that was that.

He muscled me away from Doris and Twink.

"No!" cried Doris, and Twink was frightened.

"Now don't you worry, little lady; he'll be back with you before we do a thing," he called heartily, and there I was going one way and Doris and Twink the other. What could I do?

He pushed me through a door and I had the choice of sitting in a big armchair or falling down, the way he rushed me. He kicked the door shut.

"Here's some medicine." He got a bottle out of the top desk drawer. "McClintock let me see where he put it, the fool."

"I don't want any."

"Come on now."

"Get away from me," I said, and meant it. Inside myself, I turned to admire that tone, harsh and rough and completely decisive. I'd always thought only movie gangsters could make a speech like that sound so real. And while I was backing off from myself, admiring. I suddenly sobbed and swore and swore and sobbed. It was pretty disgusting.

"Wow," said Champlain. He put the bottle down and got some pills. He filled a paper cup with ice-water and came over to me. "Take these."

"I don't want any."

"You'll take'm or I'll hold your nose and ram 'em down your neck with a stick!"

I took them and the water. As I keep saying, I'm no superman.

“What are they?”

“Dexamyl. Brighten you up, smooth you down all at once. Now tell me what’s the matter.”

I said it, said what I hadn’t put in words before. “Twink’s going to die. I want her to.”

“The two best specialists in the world say no.”

“Let her die! She’s going out of here as a basket case if you don’t! I know. I know better’n anybody. Blind. Deaf. Paralyzed. All she can do is sort of flop. Let her die!”

“Don’t be so goddam selfish.”

A kick in the face would have shocked me a good deal less. I just gawked at him.

“Sure, selfish,” he repeated. “You pulled a little bobble that anybody might have done and your wife won’t blame you for it. To you, it’s become a big, important bobble because you never were involved in anything important before. The only way you can prove it’s important is to suffer an important punishment. The worst thing you can think of is to have Twink dead. The next worse is to have her go through life the way she is now. You want one of those things.”

I called him something.

“Sure I am,” he agreed. “Absolutely. In the eyes of the guy who’s wrong, the guy who’s right is always just what you said.”

I used another one.

“That, too,” he said, and beamed.

I put up my hands and let them fall. “What do you want me to do? What are you picking on me for?”

He came over and sat sideways on the broad arm of the chair. “I want you to get in there and help us. Help Twink.”

“I’d be in the way.”

He hit me on the shoulderblade. It was done as a sort of friendly gesture, but it was done hard. “You can get through to her, can’t you?”

“Yes.”

“She’s been hurt. Badly. This is going to hurt her, too—a whole lot. She may not want to go through with it.”

“She has a choice?”

“Every patient has a choice. Other things being equal, they live or they don’t. If they’ve been hurt and they see more pain coming, they might not want to go through with it.”

"I still don't see how I—"

"Would you like to keep wondering whether you could have saved her life?"

"She's going to die, anyway."

He got up and stood in front of me with his big fists on his hips, glaring at me silently until I had to raise my face. He held me with his eyes until I couldn't stand it and then he said, rough and gentle like a tiger purring, "You damn near killed her once and now you want to finish the job. That it?"

"All right, all *right!*" I shouted. "I'll do *anything!*"

"Good!" And suddenly he dropped on one knee and took both of my hands in both of his. It was a very surprising thing for him to do and strangely effective. I could feel currents of his immense vitality from those big hands; it was as if my ego, wrinkled like a prune, was swelling up sleek and healthy.

He said, softly and with deep earnestness, "All you've got to do is make her want to live. You've got to be with her and wait for her and help her along and keep her convinced that no matter what happens, no matter how it hurts, it's worth it because she's going to live."

"All right," I whispered.

"She's only a little girl. She takes things just the way she finds them and she doesn't make allowances. If something looks like fear to her, or anger, it is that. If something looks like love, or wisdom, or strength, that's just how she'll take it. Be strong and wise for her."

"Me?"

He got up. "You." He went to the desk and got the bottle and poured a paper cup full. He held it out to me.

I wiped my eyes with the backs of my hands and stood up. "No thanks. I don't need it," I told him.

He twitched his eyebrows and drank the liquor himself and we went out.

They put me through the scrub room just as if I'd been a surgeon—gloves, mask and all—and then we went into the operating theater. Doris was already there, all fixed up, too. I went and kissed her right through the mask and she smiled.

I said, "You look lovely in white," and wondered where that had come from; and "Hi-i, Twink."

Somewhere in the blindness, in the confines of paralysis, there was a shadow of fear and, down inside that, a warm little response. And the fear evaporated. I looked up and met Champlain's eyes. That unnatural feeling under my mask was, to my complete astonishment, a grin. I nodded and he winked back and said, "I guess you can go ahead, Mac."

Now listen, Twink, I said with all my heart, I love you and I'm here, I'm right here with you no matter what happens. Something's going to happen, something big, and it's going to change everything for you. Some of it won't be ... won't be nice. But they have to do it. For you, Twink. Even when it isn't nice, it's for you. You've got to let them. You've got to help them. They love you, but I love you most of all. You mustn't go away. If it hurts you too much, you just tell me and I'll make them stop.

Then something was the matter, very much the matter. Shaken, I crowded close and tried to see what McClintock was doing. "Back off a little," he growled.

"Back off, my eyeball. What the hell are you winding around her head?"

Champlain barked at me, "Cut it out! The one thing you don't get is angry!"

Doris made a little sound. I spun to her. She was smiling. No, she wasn't. Her eyes were all screwed up. A tear came out.

"Doris!"

Her face relaxed instantly, as if the nerves had been cut. Then she opened her eyes and looked at me. "I'm all right," she said.

There was a calling, a calling, a calling.

All right, Twink, I'm here. I didn't go away. I'm right here, honey. If you want them to stop, you just say so.

A pause, then a tremulous questioning.

Yes, yes, I said, I'm here. Every single second. I'm not going away. Again the pause and then, like a flicker of light, a hot, glad little response.

Doris moaned, almost a whisper. I shot a glance at her, then at Champlain.

"You want that stopped?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I promised her she could."

Doris's hand moved. I took it. It was wet. She squeezed mine, hard.

Something from Twink, unlike anything I had ever experienced

before. Except the accident. Yes, it was like the accident—and *stop! STOP!*

“Stop!” I gasped. “Stop it!”

McClintock went right on working as if I hadn’t made a sound. The other specialist, Zein, said to Champlain as if I couldn’t hear, “Do we have to stand for this?”

“You’re damn right you do,” said Champlain.

Working, McClintock asked, “Stop? What do you mean, stop?”

Zein mumbled something to him. McClintock nodded and a nurse came flying across the room with a tray of hypodermics. McClintock used a number of them.

Twink went quiet. For a moment, I thought I would faint from relief.

All right, honey? All right? I made them stop. Twinkie. Is it all right?

Twink!

Twink!

I made some sort of noise, I don’t know what. Champlain’s hands were on my shoulders, grinding down like two oversized C-clamps. I shrugged off one, knocked off the other with my wrist. “Twink!” I shouted. Then Doris screamed shrilly and Twink vibrated like a gong.

“That won’t do,” I snapped, gesturing with my head.

“Want her out?”

“Don’t you dare,” said Doris.

“Yes. Now.”

McClintock began, “Who’s—” but Champlain said, “Shut up. Take her out.”

After that, it went very quickly.

Just a little more, Twink, and it’ll be all over and you’ll be warm and comfy and you can sleep. And I’ll be near while you sleep and with you when you wake up.

I tried to stop McClintock once more, when he took the little arm that had been immobilized across Twink’s chest for so long and twisted it brutally up and back. But this time Champlain was on McClintock’s side and he was right; the pain stopped almost instantly.

And then—was it weeks later, hours? The biggest part was over and they did things to her eyes, her mouth, while I found ways and yet new ways to thrust aside fury, ignore fatigue, negate fear,

and press on and on and around and inside with I love you, Twink; I'm here; it's all right. Just a little more, a little—there, it's stopped. Are you all right, Twink?

She was all right. She was wonderful. When they were through with her, she was weak and she looked like hell, but she was all right. I stared at her and stared at her and I couldn't believe it; I couldn't contain it, either. I didn't know what to do. So I began to laugh.

"Okay, let's get out of here." Champlain loomed over me like a grounded parachute.

"Yeah, wait." I sidled around him and went to McClintock. "Thanks," I said. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," he said tonelessly.

Zein just turned his back.

I sat by the bed where they had put Doris, tired, and I waited.

This was a lot different from that other hospital, that other time. Then I'd committed something and I was full of fear. Now I'd accomplished something and I was full of hope—and liquor, but they tasted much the same. Twink was asleep, breathing beautiful even breaths, far too weary to be afraid.

I was glad about so many things and I mentally thumbed through them all, one by one, with a huge and quiet delight. And I think that the one I was happiest about was my saying to Champlain afterward, "She'd have been perfectly all right even if I hadn't been there."

What I was so pleased about was that I said it, I didn't ask it. And he had laughed and filled my cup again.

"You're a mind-reader," he said, and it was the first time I had ever heard that and thought it was funny.

"You wanted a case history of a human being born with little or no birth trauma, you son."

"Well, nobody ever had one before," he admitted. "I'd have had a lot less trouble in my young life if my dad had been able to paddle me down that particular canal in a canoe."

"You're a louse and it was worth it," I told him.

Doris turned her head impatiently.

"I'm here," I whispered.

She looked at me out of the same composed, porcelain face. "Hi. How's your girl friend?"

"My *other* girl friend. Doris, she's beautiful! All pink. She has

two eyes. Ten toes. Eight fingers.”

“What?”

“And two thumbs. She’s all right, darling, really all right. A perfectly normal newborn girl-baby.”

“Oh, I’m ... so glad. Does she ... can you still—even after the cesarean?”

I nodded and in that split second, I wished my fool head had rolled right off. Because as I did it, I realized that I could have lied; she *wanted* me to.

She began to cry. She said, “You made them knock me out and you did it all yourself. You’ve had her to talk to all this time and you always will, as long as you both live. I’ll never ever cry about this again, I promise, because it’s not your fault and I love you, anyway. But I’m going to cry about it now.”

I crouched with my head on her pillow for a long, long time. Then I went away, because she was nowhere near finished.

She’s never cried about that since, though.

Never once.

I guess there’s some way a man can make up a thing like that to a woman.

If he keeps looking.

I guess.

Bright Segment

HE HAD NEVER HELD a girl before. He was not terrified; he had used that up earlier when he had carried her in and kicked the door shut behind him and had heard the steady drip of blood from her soaked skirt, and before that, when he had thought her dead there on the curb, and again when she made that sound, that sigh or whispered moan. He had brought her in and when he saw all that blood he had turned left, turned right, put her down on the floor, his brains all clabbered and churned and his temples athump with the unaccustomed exercise. All he could act on was *Don't get blood on the bedspread*. He turned on the overhead light and stood for a moment blinking and breathing hard; suddenly he leaped for the window to lower the blind against the streetlight staring in and all other eyes. He saw his hands reach for the blind and checked himself; they were red and ready to paint anything he touched. He made a sound, a detached part of his mind recognizing it as the exact duplicate of that agonized whisper she had uttered out there on the dark, wet street, and leapt to the light switch, seeing the one red smudge already there, knowing as he swept his hand over it he was leaving another. He stumbled to the sink in the corner and washed his hands, washed them again, every few seconds looking over his shoulder at the girl's body and the thick flat finger of blood which crept curling toward him over the linoleum.

He had his breath now, and moved more carefully to the window. He drew down the blind and pulled the curtains and looked at the sides and the bottom to see that there were no crevices. In pitch blackness he felt his way back to the opposite wall, going around the edges of the linoleum, and turned on the light again. The finger of blood was a tentacle now, fumbling toward the soft, stain-starved floorboards. From the enamel table beside the stove he snatched a plastic sponge and dropped it on the tentacle's seeking tip and was pleased, it was a reaching thing no more, it was only something spilled that could be mopped up.

He took off the bedspread and hung it over the brass headrail.

From the drawer of the china closet and from the gateleg table he took his two plastic tablecloths. He covered the bed with them, leaving plenty of overlap, then stood a moment rocking with worry and pulling out his lower lip with a thumb and forefinger. *Fix it right*, he told himself firmly. So she'll die before you fix it, never mind, fix it, right.

He expelled air from his nostrils and got books from the shelf in the china closet—a six-year-old World Almanac, a half-dozen paperbacked novels, a heavy catalog of jewelry findings. He pulled the bed away from the wall and put books one by one under two of the legs so that the bed was tilted slightly down to the foot and slightly to one side. He got a blanket and rolled it and slipped it under the plastic so that it formed a sort of fence down the high side. He got a six-quart aluminum pot from under the sink and set it on the floor by the lowest corner of the bed and pushed the trailing end of plastic down into it. *So bleed now*, he told the girl silently, with satisfaction.

He bent over her and grunted, lifting her by the armpits. Her head fell back as if she had no bones in her neck and he almost dropped her. He dragged her to the bed, leaving a wide red swath as her skirt trailed through the scarlet puddle she had lain in. He lifted her clear of the floor, settled his feet, and leaned over the bed with her in his arms. It took an unexpected effort to do it. He realized only then how drained, how tired he was, and how old. He put her down clumsily, almost dropping her in an effort to leave the carefully arranged tablecloths undisturbed, and he very nearly fell into the bed with her. He levered himself away with rubbery arms and stood panting. Around the soggy hem of her skirt blood began to gather, and as he watched, began to find its way lazily to the low corner. *So much, so much blood in a person*, he marveled, and *stop it, how to make it stop if it won't stop?*

He glanced at the locked door, the blinded window, the clock. He listened. It was raining harder now, drumming and hissing in the darkest hours. Otherwise nothing; the house was asleep and the street, dead. He was alone with his problem.

He pulled at his lip, then snatched his hand away as he tasted her blood. He coughed and ran to the sink and spat, and washed his mouth and then his hands.

So all right, go call up....

Call up? Call what, the hospital they should call the cops?

Might as well call the cops altogether. *Stupid*. What could I tell them, she's my sister, she's hit by a car, they going to believe me? Tell them the truth, a block away I see somebody push her out of a car, drive off, no lights, I bring her in out of the rain, only inside I find she is bleeding like this, they believe me? *Stupid*. What's the matter with you, mind your own business why don't you.

He thought he would pick her up now and put her back in the rain. Yes and somebody sees you, *stupid*.

He saw that the wide, streaked patch of blood on the linoleum was losing gloss where it lay thin, drying and soaking in. He picked up the sponge, two-thirds red now and the rest its original baby-blue except at one end where it looked like bread drawn with a sharp red pencil. He turned it over so it wouldn't drip while he carried it and took it to the sink and rinsed it, wringing it over and over in the running water. *Stupid*, call up somebody and get help.

Call who?

He thought of the department store where for eighteen years he had waxed floors and vacuumed rugs at night. The neighborhood, where he knew the grocery and the butcher. Closed up, asleep, everybody gone; names, numbers he didn't know and anyway, who to trust? *My God in fifty-three years you haven't got a friend?*

He took the clean sponge and sank to his knees on the linoleum, and just then the band of blood creeping down the bed reached the corner and turned to a sharp streak; *ponk* it went into the pan, and *pitti-pittipitti* in a rush, then drip-drip-drip-drip, three to the second and not stopping. He knew then with absolute and belated certainty that this bleeding was not going to stop by itself. He whimpered softly and then got up and went to the bed. "*Don't be dead,*" he said aloud, and the way his voice sounded, it frightened him. He put out his hand to her chest, but drew it back when he saw her blouse was torn and blood came from there too.

He swallowed hard and then began fumbling with her clothes. Flat ballet slippers, worn, soggy, thin like paper and little silken things he had never seen before, like just the foot of a stocking. More blood on—but no, that was peeled and chipped enamel on her cold white toes. The skirt had a button at the side and a zipper which baffled him for a moment, but he got it down and tugged the skirt off in an interminable series of jerks from the

hem, one side and the other, while she rolled slightly and limply to the motion. Small silken pants, completely soaked and so badly cut on the left side that he snapped them apart easily between his fingers; but the other side was surprisingly strong and he had to get his scissors to cut them away. The blouse buttoned up the front and was no problem; under it was a brassiere which was cut right in two near the front. He lifted it away but had to cut one of the straps with his scissors to free it altogether.

He ran to the sink with his sponge, washed it and wrung it out, filled a saucepan with warm water and ran back. He sponged the body down; it looked firm but too thin, with its shadow-ladder of ribs down each side and the sharp protrusion of the hip-bones. Under the left breast was a long cut, starting on the ribs in front and curving upward almost to the nipple. It seemed deep but the blood merely welled out. The other cut, though, in her groin, released blood brightly in regular gouts, one after the other, eager but weakly. He had seen the like before, the time Garber pinched his arm off in the elevator cable-room, but then the blood squirted a foot away. Maybe this did, too, he thought suddenly, but now it's slowing up, now it's going to stop, yes, and you, stupid, you have a dead body you can tell stories to the police.

He wrung out the sponge in the water and mopped the wound. Before it could fill up again he spread the sides of the cut and looked down into it. He could clearly see the femoral artery, looking like an end of spaghetti and cut almost through; and then there was nothing but blood again.

He squatted back on his heels, pulling heedlessly at his lip with his bloody hand and trying to think. *Pinch, shut, squeeze. Squeezers. Tweezers!* He ran to his toolbox and clawed it open. Years ago he had learned to make fine chains out of square silver wire, and he used to pass the time away by making link after tiny link, soldering each one closed with an alcohol torch and a needle-tipped iron. He picked up the tweezers and dropped them in favor of the small spring clamp which he used for holding the link while he worked on it. He ran to the sink and washed the clamp and came back to the bed. Again he sponged away the little lake of blood, and quickly reached down and got the fine jaws of the clamp on the artery near its cut. Immediately there was another gush of blood. Again he sponged it away, and in a blaze of inspiration, released the clamp, moved it to the other

side of the cut, and clamped it again.

Blood still oozed from the inside of the wound, but that terrible pulsing gush was gone. He sat back on his heels and painfully released a breath he must have held for two minutes. His eyes ached from the strain, and his brain was still whirling, but with these was a feeling, a new feeling almost like an ache or a pain, but it was nowhere and everywhere inside him; it wanted him to laugh but at the same time his eyes stung and hot salt squeezed out through holes too small for it.

After a time he recovered, blinking away his exhaustion, and sprang up, overwhelmed by urgency. *Got to fix everything.* He went to the medicine cabinet over the sink. Adhesive tape, pack of gauze pads. Maybe not big enough; okay tape together, fix right. New tube this sulfa-thia-dia-whatchamacall-um, fix anything, time I got vacuum-cleaner grit in cut hand, infection. Fixed boils too.

He filled a kettle and his saucepan with clean water and put them on the stove. Sew up, yes. He found needles, white thread, dumped them into the water. He went back to the bed and stood musing for a long time, looking at the oozing gash under the girl's breast. He sponged out the femoral wound again and stared pensively into it until the blood slowly covered the clamped artery. He could not be positive, but he had a vague recollection of something about tourniquets, they should be opened up every once in a while or there is trouble; same for an artery, maybe? Better he should sew up the artery; it was only opened, not cut through. If he could find out how to do it and still let it be like a pipe, not like a darned sock.

So into the pot went the tweezers, a small pair of needle-nose pliers, and, after some more thought, a dozen silver broach-pins out of his jewelry kit. Waiting for the water to boil, he inspected the wounds again. He pulled on his lip, frowning, then got another fine needle, held it with pliers in the gas flame until it was red, and with another of his set of pliers bent it around in a small semi-circle and dropped it into the water. From the sponge he cut a number of small flat slabs and dropped them in too.

He glanced at the clock, and then for ten minutes he scrubbed the white enamel tabletop with cleanser. He tipped it into the sink, rinsed it at the faucet, and then slowly poured the contents of the kettle over it. He took it to the stove, held it with one hand

while he fished in the boiling saucepan with a silver knife until he had the pliers resting with their handles out of the water. He grasped them gingerly with a clean wash-cloth and carefully, one by one, transferred everything from saucepan to table. By the time he had found the last of the needles and the elusive silver pins, sweat was running into his eyes and the arm that held the tabletop threatened to drop right off. But he set his stumpy yellow teeth and kept at it.

Carrying the tabletop, he kicked a wooden chair bit by bit across the room until it rested by the bed, and set his burden down on its seat. *This no hospital*, he thought, *but I fix everything*.

Hospital! Yes, in the movies—

He went to a drawer and got a clean white handkerchief and tried to tie it over his mouth and nose like in the movies. His knobby face and square head were too much for one handkerchief; it took three before he got it right, with a great white tassel hanging down the back like in an airplane picture.

He looked helplessly at his hands, then shrugged; so no rubber gloves, what the hell. I wash good. His hands were already pink and wrinkled from his labors, but he went back to the sink and scratched a bar of soap until his horny nails were packed with it, then cleaned them with a file until they hurt, and washed and cleaned them again. And at last he knelt by the bed, holding his shriven hands up in a careful salaam. Almost, he reached for his lip to pull it, but not quite.

He squeezed out two globs of the sulfa ointment onto the tabletop and, with the pliers, squashed two slabs of sponge until the creamy stuff was through and through them. He mopped out the femoral wound and placed a medicated sponge on each side of the wound, leaving the artery exposed at the bottom. Using tweezers and pliers, he laboriously threaded the curved needle while quelling the urge to stick the end of the thread into his mouth.

He managed to get four tiny stitches into the artery below the break, out of it above the break. Each one he knotted with exquisite care so that the thread would not cut the tissue but still would draw the severed edges together. Then he squatted back on his heels to rest, his shoulders afire with tension, his eyes misted. Then, taking a deep breath, he removed the clamp.

Blood filled the wound and soaked the sponges. But it came

slowly, without spurting. He shrugged grimly. So what's to do, use a tire patch? He mopped the blood out once more, and quickly filled the incision with ointment, slapping a piece of gauze over it more to hide it than to help it.

He wiped his eyebrows first with one shoulder, then the other, and fixed his eyes on the opposite wall the way he used to do when he worked on his little silver chains. When the mist went away he turned his attention to the long cut on the underside of the breast. He didn't know how to stitch one this size, but he could cook and he knew how to skewer up a chicken. Biting his tongue, he stuck the first of his silver pins into the flesh at right angles to the cut, pressing it across the wound and out the other side. He started the next pin not quite an inch away, and the same with the third. The fourth grated on something in the wound; it startled him like a door slamming and he bit his tongue painfully. He backed the pin out and probed carefully with his tweezers. Yes, something hard in there. He probed deeper with both points of the tweezers, feeling them enter uncut tissue with a soft crunching that only a fearful fingertip could hear. He conquered a shudder and glanced up at the girl's face. He resolved not to look up there again. It was a very dead face.

Stupid! but the self-insult was lost in concentration even as it was born. The tweezers closed on something hard, slippery and stubborn. He worked it gently back and forth, feeling a puzzled annoyance at this unfamiliar flesh that yielded as he moved. Gradually, very gradually, a sharp angular corner of *something* appeared. He kept at it until there was enough to grasp with his fingers; then he set his tweezers aside and gently worked it loose. Blood began to flow freely before it was half out, but he did not stop until he could draw it free. The light glinted on the strip of hollow-ground steel and its shattered margins; he turned it over twice before it came to him that it was a piece of straight razor. He set it down on his enamel table, thinking of what the police might have said to him if he had turned her over to them with that story about a car accident.

He stanchd the blood, pulled the wound as wide apart as he could. The nipple writhed under his fingers, its pink halo shrunk and wrinkled; he grunted, thinking that a bug had crawled under his hand, and then aware that whatever the thing meant, it couldn't mean death, not yet anyway. He had to go

back and start over, stanching the cut and spreading it, and quickly squeezing in as much ointment as it would hold. Then he went on with his insertion of the silver pins, until there was a little ladder of twelve of them from one end of the wound to the other. He took his thread, doubled it, put the loop around the topmost pin and drew the two parts of the thread underneath. Holding them both in one hand, he gently pinched the edges of the wound together at the pin. Then he drew the loop tight without cutting, crossed the threads and put them under the next pin, and again closed the wound. He continued this all the way down, lacing the cut closed around the ladder of pins. At the bottom he tied the thread off and cut it. There was blood and ointment all over his handiwork, but when he mopped up it looked good to him.

He stood up and let sensation flow agonizingly into his numb feet. He was sopping wet; he could feel perspiration searching its way down through the hairs of his legs; like a migration of bedbugs. He looked down at himself; wrinkles and water and blood. He looked across at the wavery mirror, and saw a bandaged goblin with brow-ridges like a shelf and sunken eyes with a cast to them, with grizzled hair which could be scrubbed only to the color of grime, and with a great gout of blood where the mouth hid behind the bandage. He snatched it down and looked again. *More better you cover your face, no matter what.* He turned away, not from his face, but with it, in the pained patience of a burro with saddle sores.

Wearily he carried his enameled tabletop to the sink. He washed his hands and forearms and took off the handkerchiefs from around his neck and washed his face. Then he got what was left of his sponge and a pan of warm soapy water and came back to the bed.

It took him hours. He sponged the tablecloths on which she lay, shifted her gently so as to put no strain on the wounds, and washed and dried where she had lain. He washed her from head to toe, going back for clean water, and then had to dry the bed again afterward. When he lifted her head he found her hair matted and tacky with rain and drying blood, and fresh blood with it, so he propped up her shoulders with a big pillow under the plastic and tipped her head back and washed and dried her hair, and found an ugly lump and a bleeding contusion on the

back of her head. He combed the hair away from it on each side and put cold water on it, and it stopped bleeding, but there was a lump the size of a plum. He separated half a dozen of the gauze pads and packed them around the lump so that it need not take the pressure off her head; he dared not turn her over.

When her hair was wet and fouled it was only a dark mat, but cleaned and combed, it was the darkest of auburns, perfectly straight. There was a broad lustrous band of it on the bed on each side of her face, which was radiant with pallor, cold as a moon. He covered her with the bedspread, and for a long while stood over her, full of that strange nowhere-everywhere almost-pain, not liking it but afraid to turn away from it ... maybe he would never have it again.

He sighed, a thing that came from his marrow and his years, and doggedly set to work scrubbing the floor. When he had finished, and the needles and thread were put away, the bit of tape which he had not used, the wrappers of the gauze pads and the pan of blood from the end of the bed disposed of, and all the tools cleaned and back in their box, the night was over and daylight pressed weakly against the drawn blind. He turned out the light and stood without breathing, listening with all his mind, wanting to know from where he stood if she still lived. To bend close and find out she was gone—oh no. He wanted to know from here.

But a truck went by, and a woman called a child, and someone laughed; so he went and knelt by the bed and closed his eyes and slowly put his hand on her throat. It was cool—please, not cold!—and quiet as a lost glove.

Then the hairs on the back of his hand stirred to her breath, and again, the faintest of motions. The stinging came to his eyes and through and through him came the fiery urge to do: make some soup, buy some medicine, maybe, for her, a ribbon or a watch; clean the house, run to the store ... and while doing all these things, all at once, to shout and shout great shaking wordless bellows to tell himself over and over again, so he could hear for sure, that she was alive. At the very peak of this explosion of urges, there was a funny little side-slip and he was fast asleep.

He dreamed someone was sewing his legs together with a big

curved sail needle, and at the same time drawing the thread from his belly; he could feel the spool inside spinning and emptying. He groaned and opened his eyes, and knew instantly where he was and what had happened, and hated himself for the noise he made. He lifted his hand and churned his fingers to be sure they could feel, and lowered them gently to her throat. It was warm—no, hot, too hot. He pushed back from the bed and scrabbled half-across the floor on his knuckles and his numb, rubbery legs. Cursing silently he made a long lunge and caught the wooden chair to him, and used it to climb to his feet. He dared not let it go, so clumped softly with it over to the corner, where he twisted and hung gasping to the edge of the sink, while boiling acid ate downward through his legs. When he could, he splashed cold water on his face and neck and, still drying himself on a towel, stumbled across to the bed. He flung the bedspread off and *stupid!* he almost screamed as it plucked at his fingers on the way; it had adhered to the wound in her groin and he was sure he had ripped it to shreds, torn a whole section out of the clumsily patched artery. And he couldn't see; it must be getting dark outside; how long had he crouched there? He ran to the light switch, leaped back. Yes, bleeding, it was bleeding again—

But a little, only a very little. The gauze was turned up perhaps halfway, and though the exposed wound was wet with blood, blood was not running. It had, while he was asleep, but hardly enough to find its way to the mattress. He lifted the loose corner of the gauze very gently, and found it stuck fast. But the sponges, the little sponges to put on the sulfa-whatchama, they were still in the wound. He'd meant to take them out after a couple of hours, not let the whole clot form around them!

He ran for warm water, his big sponge. Soap in it, yes. He squatted beside the bed, though his legs still protested noisily, and began to bathe the gauze with tiny, gentle touches.

Something made him look up. She had her eyes open, and was looking down at him. Her face and her eyes were utterly without expression. He watched them close slowly and slowly open again, lackluster and uninterested. "All right, all right," he said harshly, "I fix everything." She just kept on looking. He nodded violently, it was all that soothes, all that encourages, hope for her and a total promise for her, but it was only a rapid bobbing of his big ugly head. Annoyed as he always was at his own speechlessness,

he went back to work. He got the gauze off and began soaking the edge of one of the sponges. When he thought it was ready to come, he tugged gently at it.

In a high, whispery soprano, "Ho-o-o-o ...?" she said; it was like a question and a sob. Slowly she turned her head to the left. "Ho-o-o-o?" She turned her head again and slipped back to unconsciousness.

"I," he said loudly, excitedly, and "I—" and that was all; she wouldn't hear him anyway. He held still until his hands stopped trembling, and went on with the job.

The wound looked wonderfully clean, though the skin all around it was dry and hot.

Down inside the cut he could see the artery in a nest of wet jelly; that was probably right—he didn't know, but it looked all right, he wouldn't disturb it. He packed the opening full of ointment, pressed the edges gently together, and put on a piece of tape. It promptly came unstuck, so he discarded it and dried the flesh all around the wound, put on gauze first, then the tape, and this time it held.

The other cut was quite closed, though more so where the pins were than between them. It too was surrounded by hot, dry, red flesh.

The scrape on the back of her head had not bled, but the lump was bigger than ever. Her face and neck were dry and very warm, though the rest of her body seemed cool. He went for a cold cloth and put it across her eyes and pressed it down on her cheeks, and she sighed. When he took it away she was looking at him again.

"You all right?" he asked her, and inanely, "You all right," he told her. A small frown flickered for a moment and then her eyes closed. He knew somehow that she was asleep. He touched her cheeks with the backs of his fingers. "Very hot," he muttered.

He turned out the light and in the dimness changed his clothes. From the bottom of a drawer he took a child's exercise book, and from it a piece of paper with a telephone number in large black penciled script. "I come back," he said to the darkness. She didn't say anything. He went out, locking the door behind him.

Laboriously he called the office from the big drugstore, referring to his paper for each digit and for each, holding the dial against the stop for a full three or four seconds as if to be sure the

number would stick. He got the big boss Mr. Laddie first of all, which was acutely embarrassing; he had not spoken to him in a dozen years. At the top of his bull voice he collided with Laddie's third impatient "Hello?" with "Sick! I—uh, *sick!*" He heard the phone say "—in God's name ...?" and Mr. Wismer's laughter, and "Gimme the phone, that's got to be that orangutan of mine," and right in his ear, "Hello?"

"Sick tonight," he shouted.

"What's the matter with you?"

He swallowed. "I can't," he yelled.

"That's just old age," said Mr. Wismer. He heard Mr. Laddie laughing too. Mr. Wismer said, "How many nights you had off in the last fifteen years?"

He thought about it. "No!" he roared. Anyway, it was eighteen years.

"You know, that's right," said Mr. Wismer, speaking to Mr. Laddie without trying to cover his phone, "Fifteen years and never asked for a night off before."

"So who needs him? Give him all his nights off."

"Not at those prices," said Mr. Wismer, and to his phone, "Sure, dummy, take off. Don't work no con games." The phone clicked off on laughter, and he waited there in the booth until he was sure nothing else would be said. Then he hung up his receiver and emerged into the big drugstore where everyone all over was looking at him. Well, they always did. That didn't bother him. Only one thing bothered him, and that was Mr. Laddie's voice saying over and over in his head, "So who needs him?" He knew he would have to stop and face those words and let them and all that went with them go through his mind. But not now, please not now.

He kept them away by being busy; he bought tape and gauze and ointment and a canvas cot and three icebags and, after some thought, aspirin, because someone had told him once ... and then to the supermarket where he bought enough to feed a family of nine for nine days. And for all his bundles, he still had a thick arm and a wide shoulder for a twenty-five-pound cake of ice.

He got the door open and the ice in the box, and went out in the hall and picked up the bundles and brought those in, and then went to her. She was burning up, and her breathing was like the way seabirds fly into the wind, a small beat, a small beat, and

a long wait, balancing. He cracked a corner off the ice-cake, wrapped it in a dish-towel and whacked it angrily against the sink. He crowded the crushed ice into one of the bags and put it on her head. She sighed but did not open her eyes. He filled the other bags and put one on her breast and one on her groin. He wrung his hands uselessly over her until it came to him *she has to eat, losing blood like that.*

So he cooked, tremendously, watching her every second minute. He made minestrone and baked cabbage and mashed potatoes and veal cutlets. He cut a pie and warmed cinnamon buns, and he had hot coffee with ice cream ready to spoon into it. She didn't eat it, any of it, nor did she drink a drop. She lay there and occasionally let her head fall to the side, so he had to run and pick up the icebag and replace it. Once again she sighed, and once he thought she opened her eyes, but couldn't be sure.

On the second day she ate nothing and drank nothing, and her fever was unbelievable. During the night, crouched on the floor beside her, he awoke once with the echoes of weeping still in the room, but he may have dreamed it.

Once he cut the tenderest, juiciest piece of veal he could find on a cutlet, and put it between her lips. Three hours later he pressed them apart to put in another piece, but the first one was still there. The same thing happened with aspirin, little white crumbs on a dry tongue.

And the time soon came when he had busied himself out of things to do, and fretted himself into a worry-reflex that operated by itself, and the very act of thinking new thoughts trapped him into facing the old ones, and then of course there was nothing to do but let them run on through, with all the ache and humiliation they carried with them. He was trying to think a new thing about what would happen if he called a doctor, and the doctor would want to take her to a hospital; he would say, "She needs treatment, old man, she doesn't need you," and there it was in his mind, ready to run, so:

Be eleven years old, bulky and strong and shy, standing in the kitchen doorway, holding your wooden box by its string and trying to shape your mouth so that the reluctant words can press out properly; and there's Mama hunched over a gin bottle like a cat over a half-eaten bird, peering; watch her lipless wide mouth

twitch and say, "Don't stand there clackin' and slurpin'! Speak up, boy! What are you tryin' to say, you're leaving?"

So nod, it's easier, and she'll say "Leave, then, leave, who needs you?" and you go:

And be a squat, powerful sixteen and go to the recruiting station and watch the sergeant with the presses and creases asking "Whadda *you* want?" and you try, you try and you can't say it so you nod your head at the poster with the pointing finger, UNCLE SAM NEEDS YOU; and the sergeant glances at it and at you, and suddenly his pointing finger is half an inch away from your nose; cross-eyed you watch it while he barks, "Well, Uncle don't need *you*!" and you wait, watching the finger that way, not moving until you understand; you understand things real good, it's just that you hear slowly. So there you hang cross-eyed and they all laugh.

Or 'way back, you're eight years old and in school, that Phyllis with the row of springy brown sausage-curls flying when she tosses her head, pink and clean and so pretty; you have the chocolates wrapped in gold paper tied in goldstring mesh; you go up the aisle to her desk and put the chocolates down and run back; she comes down the aisle and throws them so hard the mesh breaks on your desk and she says, loud, "I don't need these and I don't need you, and you know what, you got snot on your face," and you put up your hand and sure enough you have.

That's all. Only every time anyone says "Who needs him?" or the like, you have to go through all of them, every one. Sooner or later, however much you put it off, you've got to do it all.

I get doctor, you don't need me.

You die, you don't need me.

Please ...

Far back in her throat, a scraping hiss, and her lips moved. She held his eyes with hers, and her lips moved silently, and a little late for the lips, the hiss came again. He didn't know how he guessed right, but he did and brought water, dribbling it slowly on her mouth. She licked at it greedily, lifting her head up. He put a hand under it, being careful of the lump, and helped her. After a while she slumped back and smiled weakly at the cup. Then she looked up into his face and though the smile disappeared, he felt much better. He ran to the icebox and the

stove, and got glasses and straws—one each of orange juice, chocolate milk, plain milk, consommé from a can, and ice water. He lined them up on the chair-seat by the bed and watched them and her eagerly, like a circus seal waiting to play “America” on the bulb-horns. She did smile this time, faintly, briefly, but right at him, and he tried the consommé. She drank almost half of it through the straw without stopping and fell asleep.

Later, when he checked to see if there was any bleeding, the plastic sheet was wet, but not with blood. *Stupid!* he raged at himself, and stamped out and bought a bedpan.

She slept a lot now, and ate often but lightly. She began to watch him as he moved about; sometimes when he thought she was asleep, he would turn and meet her eyes. Mostly, it was his hands she watched, those next two days. He washed and ironed her clothes, and sat and mended them with straight small stitches; he hung by his elbows to the edge of the enameled table and worked his silver wire, making her a brooch like a flower on a fan, and a pendant on a silver chain, and a bracelet to match them. She watched his hands while he cooked; he made his own spaghetti—tagliatelli, really—rolling and rolling the dough until it was a huge tough sheet, winding it up like a jelly-roll only tight, slicing it in quick, accurate flickers of a paring-knife so it came out like yellow-white flat shoelaces. He had hands which had never learned their limitations, because he had never thought to limit them. Nothing else in life cared for this man but his hands, and since they did everything, they could do anything.

But when he changed her dressings or washed her, or helped with the bedpan, she never looked at his hands. She would lie perfectly still and watch his face.

She was very weak at first and could move nothing but her head. He was glad because her stitches were healing nicely. When he withdrew the pins it must have hurt, but she made not a sound; twelve flickers of her smooth brow, one for each pin as it came out.

“Hurts,” he rumbled.

Faintly, she nodded. It was the first communication between them, except for those mute, crowded eyes following him about. She smiled too, as she nodded, and he turned his back and ground his knuckles into his eyes and felt wonderful.

He went back to work on the sixth night, having pattered and fussed over her all day to keep her from sleeping until he was ready to leave, then not leaving until he was sure she was fast asleep. He would lock her in and hurry to work, warm inside and ready to do three men's work; and home again in the dark early hours as fast as his bandy legs would carry him, bringing her a present—a little radio, a scarf, something special to eat—every single day. He would lock the door firmly and then hurry to her, touching her forehead and cheek to see what her temperature was, straightening the bed gently so she wouldn't wake. Then he would go out of her sight, away back by the sink, and undress and change to the long drawers he slept in, and come back and curl up on the camp cot. For perhaps an hour and a half he would sleep like a stone, but after that the slightest rustle of her sheet, the smallest catch of breath, would bring him to her in a bound, croaking, "You all right?" and hanging over her tensely, frantically trying to divine what she might need, what he might do or get for her.

And when the daylight came he would give her warm milk with an egg beaten in it, and then he would bathe her and change her dressings and comb her hair, and when there was nothing left to do for her he would clean the room, scrub the floor, wash clothes and dishes and, interminably, cook. In the afternoon he shopped, moving everywhere at a half-trot, running home again as soon as he could to show her what he had bought, what he had planned for her dinner. All these days, and then these weeks, he glowed inwardly, hugging the glow while he was away from her, fanning it with her presence when they were together.

He found her crying one afternoon late in the second week, staring at the little radio with the tears streaking her face. He made a harsh cooing syllable and wiped her cheeks with a dry washcloth and stood back with torture on his animal face. She patted his hand weakly, and made a series of faint gestures which utterly baffled him. He sat on the bedside chair and put his face close to hers as if he could tear the meaning out of her with his eyes. There was something different about her; she had watched him, up to now, with the fascinated, uncomprehending attention of a kitten watching a tankful of tropical fish; but now there was something more in her gaze, in the way she moved and in what she did.

"You hurt?" he rasped.

She shook her head. Her mouth moved, and she pointed to it and began to cry again.

"Oh, you hungry. I fix, fix good." He rose but she caught his wrist, shaking her head and crying, but smiling too. He sat down, torn apart by his perplexity. Again she moved her mouth, pointing to it, shaking her head.

"No talk," he said. She was breathing so hard it frightened him, but when he said that she gasped and half sat up; he caught her shoulders and put her down, but she was nodding urgently. "You can't talk!" he said.

Yes, yes! she nodded.

He looked at her for a long time. The music on the radio stopped and someone began to sell used cars in a crackling baritone. She glanced at it and her eyes filled with tears again. He leaned across her and shut the set off. After a profound effort he formed his mouth in the right shape and released a disdainful snort: "Ha! What you want talk? Don't talk. I fix everything, no talk. I—" He ran out of words, so instead slapped himself powerfully on the chest and nodded at her, the stove, the bedpan, the tray of bandages. He said again, "What you want talk?"

She looked up at him, overwhelmed by his violence, and shrank down. He tenderly wiped her cheeks again, mumbling, "I fix everything."

He came home in the dark one morning, and after seeing that she was comfortable according to his iron standards, went to bed. The smell of bacon and fresh coffee was, of course, part of a dream; what else could it be? And the faint sounds of movement around the room had to be his weary imagination.

He opened his eyes on the dream and closed them again, laughing at himself for a crazy stupid. Then he went still inside, and slowly opened his eyes again.

Beside his cot was the bedside chair, and on it was a plate of fried eggs and crisp bacon, a cup of strong black coffee, toast with the gold of butter disappearing into its older gold. He stared at these things in total disbelief, and then looked up.

She was sitting on the end of the bed, where it formed an eight-inch corridor between itself and the cot. She wore her pressed and mended blouse and her skirt. Her shoulders sagged with

weariness and she seemed to have some difficulty in holding her head up; her hands hung limply between her knees. But her face was suffused with delight and anticipation as she watched him waking up to his breakfast.

His mouth writhed and he bared his blunt yellow teeth, and ground them together while he uttered a howl of fury. It was a strangled, rasping sound and she scuttled away from it as if it had burned her, and crouched in the middle of the bed with her eyes huge and her mouth slack. He advanced on her with his arms raised and his big fists clenched; she dropped her face on the bed and covered the back of her neck with both hands and lay there trembling. For a long moment he hung over her, then slowly dropped his arms. He tugged at the skirt. "Take off," he grated. He tugged it again, harder.

She peeped up at him and then slowly turned over. She fumbled weakly at the button. He helped her. He pulled the skirt away and tossed it on the cot, and gestured sternly at the blouse. She unbuttoned it and he lifted it from her shoulders. He pulled down the sheet, taking it right out from under her. He took her ankles gently in his powerful hands and pulled them down until she was straightened out on the bed, and then covered her carefully. He was breathing hard. She watched him in terror.

In a frightening quiet he turned back to his cot and the laden chair beside it. Slowly he picked up the cup of coffee and smashed it on the floor. Steadily as the beat of a woodman's axe the saucer followed, the plate of toast, the plate of eggs. China and yolk squirted and sprayed over the floor and on the walls. When he had finished he turned back to her. "I fix everything," he said hoarsely. He emphasized each syllable with a thick forefinger as he said again, "I fix everything."

She whipped over to her stomach and buried her face in the pillow, and began to sob so hard he could feel the bed shaking the floor through the soles of his feet. He turned angrily away from her and got a pan and a scrub-brush and a broom and dustpan, and laboriously, methodically, cleaned up the mess.

Two hours later he approached her where she lay, still on her stomach, stiff and motionless. He had had a long time to think of what to say: "Look, you see, you *sick* ... you see?" He said it, as gently as he could. He put his hand on her shoulder but she twitched violently, flinging it away. Hurt and baffled, he backed

away and sat down on the couch, watching her miserably.

She wouldn't eat any lunch.

She wouldn't eat any dinner.

As the time approached for him to go to work, she turned over. He still sat on the cot in his long johns, utter misery on his face and in every line of his ugly body. She looked at him and her eyes filled with tears. He met her gaze but did not move. She sighed suddenly and held out her hand. He leaped to it and pulled it to his forehead, knelt, bowed over it and began to cry. She patted his wiry hair until the storm passed, which it did abruptly, at its height. He sprang away from her and clattered pans on the stove, and in a few minutes brought her some bread and gravy and a parboiled artichoke, rich with olive oil and basil. She smiled wanly and took the plate, and slowly ate while he watched each mouthful and radiated what could only be gratitude. Then he changed his clothes and went to work.

He brought her a red housecoat when she began to sit up, though he would not let her out of bed. He brought her a glass globe in which a flower would keep, submerged in water, for a week, and two live turtles in a plastic bowl and a pale-blue toy rabbit with a music box in it that played "Rock-a-bye Baby" and a blinding vermilion lipstick. She remained obedient and more watchful than ever; when his fussing and puttering were over and he took up his crouch on the cot, waiting for whatever need in her he could divine next, their eyes would meet, and increasingly, his would drop. She would hold the blue rabbit tight to her and watch him unblinkingly, or smile suddenly, parting her lips as if something vitally important and deeply happy was about to escape them. Sometimes she seemed inexpressibly sad, and sometimes she was so restless that he would go to her and stroke her hair until she fell asleep, or seemed to. It occurred to him that he had not seen her wounds for almost two days, and that perhaps they were bothering her during one of these restless spells, and so he pressed her gently down and uncovered her. He touched the scar carefully and she suddenly thrust his hand away and grasped her own flesh firmly, kneading it, slapping it stingingly. Shocked, he looked at her face and saw she was smiling, nodding. "Hurt?" She shook her head. He said, proudly, as he covered her, "I fix. I fix good." She nodded and caught his

hand briefly between her chin and her shoulder.

It was that night, after he had fallen into that heavy first sleep on his return from the store, that he felt the warm firm length of her tight up against him on the cot. He lay still for a moment, somnolent, uncomprehending, while quick fingers plucked at the buttons of his long johns. He brought his hands up and trapped her wrists. She was immediately still, though her breath came swiftly and her heart pounded his chest like an angry little knuckle. He made a labored, inquisitive syllable, "Wh-wha ...?" and she moved against him and then stopped, trembling. He held her wrists for more than a minute, trying to think this out, and at last sat up. He put one arm around her shoulders and the other under her knees. He stood up. She clung to him and the breath hissed in her nostrils. He moved to the side of her bed and bent slowly and put her down. He had to reach back and detach her arms from around his neck before he could straighten up. "You sleep," he said. He fumbled for the sheet and pulled it over her and tucked it around her. She lay absolutely motionless, and he touched her hair and went back to his cot. He lay down and after a long time fell into a troubled sleep. But something woke him; he lay and listened, hearing nothing. He remembered suddenly and vividly the night she had balanced between life and death, and he had awakened to the echo of a sob which was not repeated; in sudden fright he jumped up and went to her, bent down and touched her head. She was lying face down. "You cry?" he whispered, and she shook her head rapidly. He grunted and went back to bed.

It was the ninth week and it was raining; he plodded homeward through the black, shining streets, and when he turned into his own block and saw the dead, slick river stretching between him and the streetlight in front of his house, he experienced a moment of fantasy, of dreamlike disorientation; it seemed to him for a second that none of this had happened, that in a moment the car would flash by him and dip toward the curb momentarily while a limp body tumbled out, and he must run to it and take it indoors, and it would bleed, it would bleed, it might die.... He shook himself like a big dog and put his head down against the rain, saying *Stupid!* to his inner self. Nothing could be wrong, now. He had found a way to live, and live that way he would, and he

would abide no change in it.

But there was a change, and he knew it before he entered the house; his window, facing the street, had a dull orange glow which could have not have been given it by the streetlight alone. But maybe she was reading one of those paperback novels he had inherited with the apartment; maybe she had to use the bedpan or was just looking at the clock ... but the thoughts did not comfort him; he was sick with an unaccountable fear as he unlocked the hall door. His own entrance showed light through the crack at the bottom; he dropped his keys as he fumbled with them, and at last opened the door.

He gasped as if he had been struck in the solar plexus. The bed was made, flat, neat, and she was not in it. He spun around; his frantic gaze saw her and passed her before he could believe his eyes. Tall, queenly in her red housecoat, she stood at the other end of the room, by the sink.

He stared at her in amazement. She came to him, and as he filled his lungs for one of his grating yells, she put a finger on her lips and, lightly, her other hand across his mouth. Neither of these gestures, both even, would have been enough to quiet him ordinarily, but there was something else about her, something which did not wait for what he might do and would not quail before him if he did it. He was instantly confused, and silent. He stared after her as, without breaking stride, she passed him and gently closed the door. She took his hand, but the keys were in the way; she drew them from his fingers and tossed them on the table and then took his hand again, firmly. She was sure, decisive; she was one who had thought things out and weighed and discarded, and now knew what to do. But she was triumphant in some way, too; she had the poise of a victor and the radiance of the witness to a miracle. He could cope with her helplessness, of any kind, to any degree, but this—he had to think, and she gave him no time to think.

She led him to the bed and put her hands on his shoulders, turning him and making him sit down. She sat close to him, her face alight, and when again he filled his lungs, “Shh!” she hissed, sharply, and smilingly covered his mouth with her hand. She took his shoulders again and looked straight into his eyes, and said clearly, “I can talk now, I can talk!”

Numbly, he gaped at her.

"Three days already, it was a secret, it was a surprise." Her voice was husky, hoarse even, but very clear and deeper than her slight body indicated. "I been practicing, to be sure. I'm all right again, I'm all right. You fix everything!" she said, and laughed.

Hearing that laugh, seeing the pride and joy in her face, he could take nothing away from her. "Ahh ..." he said, wonderingly.

She laughed again. "I can go, I can go!" she sang. She leapt up suddenly and pirouetted, and leaned over him laughing. He gazed up at her and her flying hair, and squinted his eyes as he would looking into the sun. "Go?" he blared, the pressure of his confusion forcing the syllable out as an explosive shout.

She sobered immediately, and sat down again close to him. "Oh, honey, don't, *don't* look as if you was knifed or something. You know I can't camp on you, live off you, just *forever!*"

"No, no you stay," he blurted, anguish in his face.

"Now look," she said, speaking simply and slowly as to a child. "I'm all well again, I can talk now. It wouldn't be right, me staying, locked up here, that bedpan and all. Now wait, wait," she said quickly before he could form a word, "I don't mean I'm not grateful, you been ... you been, well, I just can't tell you. Look, nobody in my life ever did anything like this, I mean, I had to run away when I was thirteen, I done all sorts of bad things. And I got treated ... I mean, nobody else ... look, here's what I mean, up to now I'd steal, I'd rob anybody, what the hell. What I mean, why not, you see?" She shook him gently to make him see; then, recognizing the blankness and misery of his expression, she wet her lips and started over. "What I'm trying to say is, you been so kind, all this—" She waved her hand at the blue rabbit, the turtle tank, everything in the room—"I can't take any more. I mean, not a thing, not breakfast. If I could pay you back some way, no matter what, I would, you know I would." There was a tinge of bitterness in her husky voice. "Nobody can pay you anything. You don't need anything or anybody. I can't give you anything you need, or do anything for you that needs doing, you do it all yourself. If there was something you wanted from me—" She curled her hands inward and placed her fingertips between her breasts, inclining her head with a strange submissiveness that made him ache. "But no, you fix everything," she mimicked. There was no mockery in it.

"No, no, you don't go," he whispered harshly.

She patted his cheek, and her eyes loved him. "I do go," she said, smiling. Then the smile disappeared. "I got to explain to you, those hoods who cut me, I asked for that. I goofed. I was doing something real bad—well, I'll tell you. I was a runner, know what I mean? I mean dope, I was selling it."

He looked at her blankly. He was not catching one word in ten; he was biting and biting only on emptiness and uselessness, aloneness, and the terrible truth of this room without her or the blue rabbit or anything else but what it had contained all these years—linoleum with the design scrubbed off, six novels he couldn't read, a stove waiting for someone to cook for, grime and regularity and who needs you?

She misunderstood his expression. "Honey, honey, don't look at me like that, I'll never do it again. I only did it because I didn't care, I used to get glad when people hurt themselves; yeah, I mean that. I never knew someone could be kind, like you; I always thought that was sort of a lie, like the movies. Nice but not real, not for me.

"But I have to tell you, I swiped a cache, my God, twenty, twenty-two G's worth. I had it all of forty minutes, they caught up with me." Her eyes widened and saw things not in the room. "With a razor, he went to hit me with it so hard he broke it on top of the car door. He hit me here *down* and here *up*, I guess he was going to gut me but the razor was busted." She expelled air from her nostrils, and her gaze came back into the room. "I guess I got the lump on the head when they threw me out of the car. I guess that's why I couldn't talk, I heard of that. Oh *honey!* Don't look like that, you're tearing me apart!"

He looked at her dolefully and wagged his big head helplessly from side to side. She knelt before him suddenly and took both his hands. "Listen, you *got* to understand. I was going to slide out while you were working but I stayed just so I could make you understand. After all you done.... See, I'm well, I can't stay cooped up in one room forever. If I could, I'd get work some place near here and see you all the time, honest I would. But my life isn't worth a rubber dime in this town. I got to leave here and that means I got to leave town. I'll be all right, honey. I'll write to you; I'll never forget you, how could I?"

She was far ahead of him. He had grasped that she wanted to

leave him; the next thing he understood was that she wanted to leave town too.

"You don't go," he choked. "You need me."

"You don't need me," she said fondly, "and I don't need you. It comes to that, honey; it's the way you fixed it. It's the right way; can't you see that?"

Right in there was the third thing he understood.

He stood up slowly, feeling her hands slide from his, from his knees to the floor as he stepped away from her. "Oh God!" she cried from the floor where she knelt, "you're killing me, taking it this way! Can't you be happy for me?"

He stumbled across the room and caught himself on the lower shelf of the china closet. He looked back and forward along the dark, echoing corridor of his years, stretching so far and drearily, and he looked at this short bright segment slipping away from him ... He heard her quick footsteps behind him and when he turned he had the flatiron in his hand. She never saw it. She came to him bright-faced, pleading, and he put out his arms and she ran inside, and the iron curved around and crashed into the back of her head.

He lowered her gently down on the linoleum and stood for a long time over her, crying quietly.

Then he put the iron away and filled the kettle and a saucepan with water, and in the saucepan he put needles and a clamp and thread and little slabs of sponge and a knife and pliers. From the gateleg table and from a drawer he got his two plastic tablecloths and began arranging them on the bed.

"I fix everything," he murmured as he worked, "Fix it right."

So Near the Darkness

THIS IS THE STORY of a Chinese silver cigarette case, some vaseline hair tonic, a gooseneck desk lamp, and two girls—one nearly always beautiful, and one always nearly beautiful. It also may or may not concern a creature called Arrara, so named because of its peculiar snarl.

The girl who was nearly always beautiful had been christened Organtina, but when she heard a snide and subtle remark about it from one of the long-haired gentry in Greenwich Village she determinedly omitted the first two syllables. Tina was attractive in an almost miraculous way, and struck such a perfect balance in the color of her hair between blonde and brunette that one can only describe it as being the color of hair which is soft in the shadows, and breathtakingly bright in the sun.

Tina sold seashells in Chelsea, a fact which caused her considerable difficulty in describing her occupation whenever she became emotionally agitated. In her colorful little shop on the fringes of the Village, she displayed seashells and parts of seashells arranged and assembled into dolls, turtles and comedy masks.

She also conducted a flourishing trade in geegaws and a very special assortment of bric-a-brac and izthattas. The izthattas differed from the geegaws and the bric-a-brac in that the latter are unfunctional but pleasing decorative things, whereas the izthatta is a purely functional object. She loved both the izthattas and the geegaws and she made them as fast as she could. And so accomplished was her artistry that they sold like hotcakes. She knew because she had received comparative figures on hotcakes from Eddy Southworth.

The merchandising of an izthatta is very simple. You make up an object by cementing a razor-shell to a sea-snail, crowning it with a clam and spraying on some Paris Green. Almost certainly the next customer in the place will ask: "Is that a napkin ring?" or "Is that a paper weight?" or "Is that a salad-fork holder?" The correct reply should be: "I really like to deal with customers who

show both good taste and insight. But of course it is! And this morning a lady was in—”

Your next cue is to laugh gaily while the customer reaches into her jeans for the exorbitant price of the izthatta, Chelsea being near enough to the Village for jeans on ladies to be *de rigueur*.

Tina's window displays were changed weekly, and brought in a lot of trade. Now it would be a spread of fragile coral-lace and crab-claws, largely labelled: SKELETON ART. (No mussels). And next week the display would be a highly abstract piece of business all made of urchin-quill and mother-of-pearl, captivatingly captioned: UNCONCHIOUS ART, without, of course, a conch in sight.

In the third week of a warm March, Tina was busily working with tweezers, cement, Swiss pattern files and a set of surgical tools. She worked in a small alcove separated from the rest of the shop by a curved partition, with a splendid assortment of her wares spread out under a gooseneck lamp of high voltage.

The opening in the partition between the workroom and the shop was small—but so was Tina. Her knowledge of a customer's advent was gained in two ways. First, there was the photo-electric beam which crossed the outer doorway, in such a way that its interruption would actuate a mellow chime. Second, there was a hole cut through the partition. The aperture was at her eye-level as she sat at work and it enabled her to see clearly everything that went on in the shop.

Imagine, then, her astonishment when she looked up from her work and saw through the peephole that there was a man in her shop. Eddy Southworth, whose hobby was electronics, had assured her that no one could possibly pass through the outer door without breaking the photo-electric beam. Yet the chime had not rung, and indisputably there was a man in the shop—a slender, graceful man with black hair like a carapace and heavily knitted brows.

Tina rose quickly, straightened her hair and squeezed through the partition. “Yes?” she inquired, confronting the intruder so abruptly that he recoiled a step.

“Yes indeed,” said the man. He was young, and he had a voice like the middle register of an oboe. He looked up quickly and back to the showcase on which he had been leaning, the darting swiftness of his glance subtracting nothing from its thoroughness.

Tina felt like a file-drawer from which inventory cards had been quite deliberately spilled.

"Would—would you like something?" she asked faintly.

She stepped hopefully behind the showcase, but to no avail. He promptly turned his back, to gaze up and across, down and around the shop.

"The old shell game," he said as if in amazement to himself.

"There was a time," she said pleasantly, "when I had only heard that once in connection with this business, which was founded by my grandfather. Is there anything—uh—inanimate here which appeals to you?"

"Oh yes," he said, turning finally to face her. He had, it appeared, disturbingly ironic eyebrows. "Where were you on the night of March twenty-fifth, two years ago?"

She stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"I certainly am," he said soberly, "I would really like to know. It's difficult for me to explain, but you must believe that it's important to me."

"I don't think I can—Wait now." She tilted back her head and closed her eyes. Two years ago. Of course. She had been in Rochester, and—"I do remember!" she said. "It's strange that you should ask me. I was staying with an aunt in Rochester that spring, and I had a violent quarrel which seems very silly now. I was quite the Girl Scout then. I was so angry I got my kit and headed for the hills. I didn't see a soul I knew for almost two weeks."

"No one?" He stared at her intently. "Think now. Didn't anybody know where you were?"

"Not a soul," she said positively. "And where were *you* that night, if I'm not being too curious? Just where, precisely?"

He smiled a very white smile. His teeth seemed to be pointed. "I *am* sorry," he apologized. "That was very rude of me. Would you like to make some money?"

Tina nodded energetically. "By selling seashells."

"I mean real money."

"How? By selling thousands of seashells?"

He sighed. "There's one thing I'm sure of," he said. "You are being stupid on purpose."

"I shall take that as a compliment," she said, and added, "I

wonder how much more I'll have to take."

He laughed engagingly. "Your sense of humor seems to stay with you no matter what the provocation. I've noticed your window displays, for example. Laughing in the face of a business recession. You'd probably remain buoyant in the face of any menace."

"You try me," she said without inflection. "I rather think you'd be surprised."

The eyebrows tensed like the wings of a gliding gull. "Perhaps I will."

"What has my sense of humor to do with all this," she asked, meeting his gaze defiantly.

"More than you might suspect. I have a job to do, and I need a girl like you to assist me." He straightened, his long face all clear planes and forced patience. "Cigarette?"

He took a silver cigarette case from his pocket and offered it to her unopened.

She stopped her head in mid-shake and took the case. "What a lovely thing!" she exclaimed.

"Is it?" said the man.

"Surely there can be no doubt about it. What a beautiful dragon!"

"There are seven dragons," he pointed out.

"Sev—Oh, I see. Two around the edge here, all curled around each other. Uh-huh—and one peeping around the pagoda."

"There are a good many pagodas around Peiping, too."

"Hey!" she laughed. "That was my line. Now, let's see—that makes four dragons."

"There are two more on the back," he murmured.

She turned the case over. "I don't *like* those. They look positively ferocious."

"They've been fighting again. But most dragons do look ferocious."

She looked at him quizzically. His calm, handsome face had grown, if anything, more sardonic. Recognizing that he was willing to let the impossible conversation go on until closing time, she dropped her eyes to the case.

"Where's the seventh dragon?" she asked.

Arrara-arrara said the case. It spoke softly, like a lisping child with moist red lips. Tina gasped, and closed her eyes. The case

moved gently but firmly in her grasp, just as if someone were trying to twist it away from her. She trembled and opened her eyes. The young man was trying to pry it from her fingers. She raised it with a shudder of revulsion.

Arrara, said the case indignantly. The man said, "Shut up, you."

Tina said, "I didn't say anything."

"Not you," he said to Tina. "I was just thinking aloud, in reference to something else. Cigarette?"

"Thanks no," said Tina swiftly, her eyes on the case in horrified disbelief as it went back into the man's pocket. She wet her lips. "The other dragon's inside, huh?"

"That's right. Now, about this little job. I can make it decidedly worth your while if you'll come in."

"I don't doubt that," said Tina, moistening her lips. "But if I should consider it I'd like to know in advance what it is I may have to say 'No' to."

"Well, it's like this. I have a friend who wants to get married, in a manner of speaking, and you're the ideal—Oh, see here now. Stop shaking your head like that."

"I can't help it. That 'in a manner of speaking' just about does it. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. My name is Lee Brokaw. I'm a dancer—*adagio*."

He looked her up and down and smiled. "Of course I didn't really mean 'good-bye.' I wish you would save both of us the trouble involved in my becoming insistent," he said smoothly. "How about dinner tonight?"

For reply she marched to the doorway and stood there. The photocell chime crooned from the back of the shop. She threw up a firm thumb. "Come along, little man. Actually, it's past my customary closing hour."

As if this were a cue, he nodded with feigned resignation and passed through the door. "See you tomorrow," he promised.

Shaking her head, Tina went back into the shop. She was sharp-witted enough to realize that she must depend for the support of her unusual trade on unusual people. Of these she certainly had had more than her share, from the gentleman who would buy no ornament at which his schnauzer would not wag its tail, to the woman who had three rooms of her house redecorated to suit a purple tie-rack she had purchased at a fire sale. But this Lee Brokaw character was strictly eggs in the beer. What *was* it he

kept locked up in that cigarette case?

II

Tina had dinner with Eddy Southworth. He was an artist who lived and worked in the Village, but unlike most artists, he put in regular hours. He was locally well-known, and his works were considered delicate, tasteful and distinctly on the light side. He made flapjacks in the window of the Blue Tower Cafeteria, and anyone who watched his ambidextrous hot-cake-tossing knew that here indeed was an artist. Having dinner with him meant sitting across the counter, snatching phrases between servings, and filtering romantic comments through a mouthful of the *spécialité de la maison*, as follows:

“Hya, cinth.”

“Lo, quacious.” This was a routine, an intimacy, and a mental exercise. “Stack them with cherry syrup.”

“Food of the Gods! How’s it with you, Tina?” Before she could reply he was gone to the front of the place, to fill the air with somersaulting pancakes. On his way back with a batter-bucket, she determinedly clipped his elbow.

“Eddy, what kind of a man could walk between a photocell and a light and not ring an alarm?”

“A ghost,” said Eddy solemnly. “Or a vampire. Did you have one in the shop today?”

She nodded. “That’s nice,” he said, automatically. He went to the mixer at the back of the cafeteria and began to fill his bucket. “What?” he bellowed suddenly, and came back. “What about this guy? Did he wear a black cloak? Did he have a widow’s peak, pointed teeth and a demon in his pocket?”

“No—I mean, yes. And he has a dragon in his cigarette case.”

Her hotcakes arrived. Eddy sprinted to the front, tossed and stacked eight additional cakes, rocketed to the back and tuned off the batter-cock just as the batter was forming a reverse miniscus. Then he peered over the edge of the bucket, and went back with it at a dead run, the bucket describing one single arc, like a pendulum-bomb, from the mixer to the griddles, without losing a drop. Someone up the line applauded. Eddy squirted a dozen discs of batter onto the griddle and came back to Tina.

“Are you kidding?”

“Ah thirtny am mot,” she said through a hotcake.

"You just mean a wolf. Not a werewolf."

"Ath a matter of ah," she said, and swallowed, "he isn't. I mean, he didn't seem to be. He wants me for something, he says."

He nodded eagerly. "But he's not a wolf. You're sure of that?"

"I think," she twinkled—and it cost her an effort—"that he wants me for a fate worse than a fate worse than death."

She changed her mouth from a bow to an O, and stoked. Eddy picked up two turners instead of one, a sign of deep thought.

"What's with this dragon you spoke about?" he asked.

"It's in the most gorgeous silver cigarette case you ever saw."

"What does it do?"

"It goes *arrara*."

Eddy jumped back. "Don't do that," he gasped. "For Pete's sake —"

"I'm sorry, Eddy. Terribly sorry. But that's exactly what it does. I—I'd like some coffee."

"Black with one!" Eddy bellowed. "Where does this apple tend bar? Or does he panhandle on the Bowery?"

"He's a dancer," Tina said. "When he left he pointed to the Mello Club and said, 'Look at that.' After I shut up the shop I looked. He's billed there—'Brokaw and Rapunzel, adagio.'"

"I'm out of grease," said Eddy to the waitress. "Tina, I don't like the sound of this guy."

"Yes, Eddy."

"See you tomorrow?"

"Yes, Eddy."

"Stay away from the Mello Club."

"Yes, Eddy."

So Tina went to the Mello Club to catch Brokaw's act.

The Mello Club was a cramped and crowded bistro in which the ceiling, having heard so many customers ask "How low can you get?" seemed to have accepted the challenge. The lighting was of a dimness to which the human eye could not become accustomed, because of its reluctance to recognize such atrocious color combinations.

The dimness was functional, insofar as the place had a function. It kept the customers in obscurity, so that each customer thought his own disgust was unshared, and therefore remained. It kept the customers' disgust from reaching the master of ceremonies while he created it. It suited the quality of the air,

so that taint did not intrude. In short, a fine, healthy place.

Tina fumbled her way down the steps and into the club, sighted a gleam of brass from a trombone bell, pointed her elbow at it, closed her eyes and walked. She was small, but she had the directness of a destroyer escort. She brought up against a table not ten feet from the dance floor, which was, of course, two-thirds of the way to the wall. She sat down.

Hardly had she done so when the up-beat cacophony from the orchestra came to a screaming stop and the master of ceremonies came out, dragging with him a microphone with a head as polished and featureless as his own. Into it and the glare of a ceiling spot which painfully flooded him, he began to recite what had happened to him on the way to the club that night.

Tina rested her elbows on the table as the most comfortable way to keep her hands over her ears, and tried to locate Lee Brokaw in the babbling gloom. Occasionally she lifted her hands enough to find out if the emcee's droning obscenities were turning into anything like an announcement.

It was hot. Someone was breathing down her neck. She leaned forward a little and found herself breathing in someone's armpit. She leaned back again. It must have been then that the announcement was made, because suddenly, shockingly, the lights went out.

For a moment someone with the touch of a fly's foot seemed to be brushing a cymbal, and then there was not a sound from the tables. Slowly a blue-green light began to glow, so faintly at first that it could have been there for seconds before she noticed it at all. Gradually she became aware of a figure standing in the middle of the dance floor. The emcee? No, for he had been wearing a dinner jacket. This was something bone-white and slender. The light increased, or her eyes sharpened, and she suddenly saw that it was a girl, nude, splendidly if slightly built, and wearing some sort of a tall hat or—a crown. The light steadied, but did not become bright enough to show anything clearly.

The girl began to dance. There was no sonorous music, only a faint, flute-like plucking which she recognized as a melody played solely in the harmonics of a guitar. The girl moved slowly. She took two small steps forward, and then sank to her knees and

touched her forehead to the floor.

The music stopped, but the heartbeat drum quickened as she straightened up again. There was a moment when it missed one beat, and the shock of that was followed by a blaze of yellow light and a painful, discordant blare from every brass in the orchestra.

Tina's aching eyes caught one brief glimpse of the girl's body as the dancer shook her head. Her crown was hair—real spun-gold hair that cascaded down and around her like water. She knelt there, head raised, wide blue eyes staring, arms up and out, cloaked in shimmering blue-green gold. And only then did Tina see Lee Brokaw.

He was standing behind the girl, looking down at her impassively. It was he who held her white arms up, with his long fingers around her slender wrists. Slowly he brought them together and grasped both wrists in one hand. She turned toward him and rose. Her hair was impossible—bewildering. It fell to the floor in a mass that was thick and delicate at once. It was liquid fire; it was smoke. It was like no other hair Tina had ever seen. She remembered the name of the act then—Brokaw and Rapunzel. *"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your golden hair ..."*

The music burst hoarsely into a travesty of the Apache dance. With slow, feline steps they moved about the floor. Brokaw's handsome, almost beautiful face held the girl's eyes. Her features were as motionless as wax.

As they danced, he took one of her arms behind her and apparently began to twist it. Her body stiffened and arched backward; and her head too went back. Brokaw bared his teeth in a frightful smile, bent his head and put his mouth to her throat. They danced that way for four slow measures, and when he lifted his head, the marks of his teeth were easy to see.

Abruptly he pirouetted away from her, and around her. She held her arms over her head, her hands touching his, her eyes glassily staring. The tempo of the music rose. Brokaw spun the girl to him and away, to him and away, as the music sped up to its climax. He stopped her in a final pirouette, both her arms pinioned behind her.

In a crescendo of noise and light, he raised his fist and smashed it into her upturned face. She dropped like rag doll, and, as the cymbals crashed three times, and with his face as calm as a sunlit

cathedral, he stamped on her head, crushing it flat.

In the silence and the blaze of light, Lee Brokaw stood up, smiled, and bowed from the waist. Then a woman screamed, and applause broke out in one great shout which changed to a roar of bruising palms and stamping feet. Brokaw bowed again, scooped up the limp collection of long limbs and golden hair, and tossed it over his shoulder. Sawdust trickled from the flattened head, and the clever hinging of one white elbow could be seen.

"But—she danced by herself!" Tina said aloud.

"In what kind of light?" said a man next to her, pounding the table. "And him in black!"

The thunder rose, and rose again as the lights dimmed to toxic obscurity. And finally Lee Brokaw came out to take a second bow.

He stepped out to meet the sudden spotlight, and as it fell on him he turned pale and clutched his chest. Something made the ringsiders shrink back from him. Something—the faintest of sounds.

Arrara ...

"He's sick!" whispered someone.

A woman half-rose and cried, "His heart!"

"Has he got a heart on the right side?" asked the man next to Tina.

Tina said clearly, "He has a dragon in his cigarette case." But of course no one paid her any attention.

Brokaw bowed stiffly and went out. The chrome-plated master of ceremonies returned with his pasty-faced microphone, and Tina rose, dazedly made her way to the exit, handed a palm which materialized before her the cover charge plus ten percent, and escaped up the stairs.

The outside air tasted so good it made her sneeze. She was still shuddering inside over Brokaw's finale. She walked briskly homeward, and gradually the shock of that terrifying performance was replaced by curiosity.

What manner of man *was* Lee Brokaw? With an act like that, why wasn't he on Fifty-second Street? Or even on Broadway? Why, if he so casually offered that cigarette case around to chance acquaintances was he so profoundly affected when it growled *at him*?

How had he been so sure she would see him again? Did he have her figured so well that he had known she would be at the

performance? Most of all, what on earth could he want with her?

Turning in at her apartment house, she fingered her cheek and jaw. Maybe he wanted a dancing partner who would spar a little and thus add a certain color to the climax. Of course, she had to admit that all that hair *was* becoming ...

III

Tina undressed, went into her pajamas. She felt much better after that. She loaded her night table with sketching materials, a book on design, and two volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* which had plates of shells. Two button sets and an izthatta later, she was happily asleep.

It must have been four hours afterward that she awoke. She opened her eyes very quietly, without moving. Something urged her not to start up, but to relax and look the situation over. The situation was Lee Brokaw's smooth, imperturbable face, slightly larger than life size. It floated, apparently, in midair between her and the opposite wall. It wore a gentle smile which ended at the cheekbones. The eyes were as steady and as deep as ever.

She said, "Wh-wh—" and the face turned chillingly upside down, got quite pink, then scarlet—a real blood-scarlet, as if it were looking at her through red glass—and then slowly disappeared.

Tina blanched and dived under the covers. In a moment one arm crept out and, feeling along the night table, turned on the lamp. She worked the blanket over her head and face, found an edge, doubled it into a sort of peephole, and peered out.

There was nothing to see.

She took a deep breath, held it, flung the covers off, bounded across the room and switched on the overhead light.

Still nothing. She withdrew into the center of the room and gazed slowly around. A movement caught the corner of her eye, and she cried out in terror as she turned to face—her own reflection in the bathroom mirror!

"Great day in the morning! Is that me?" she muttered, staring in shocked disbelief at the dilated pupils, the chalky countenance.

"Bad dreams," she told her reflection reassuringly. "Some way or other, sister, you're not living right."

She washed her face and went back to bed. She lay a moment in thought, then got up again and located a pair of nub-spiked

golf shoes. These she put on the night table. Then she rolled over, tucked herself in, threw back the covers, got up, switched off the bathroom light, the overhead light, and, at last, the night-table lamp.

She was, by this time, much more annoyed than frightened. It had been many a moon since she had let anything throw her into such a dither. She fell asleep angrily, almost by an effort of will, and found herself in a fine technicolor nightmare involving a purring dragon which wanted to stamp on her head.

She came up out of it fighting, only to find Brokaw's glowing face staring at her again. This time she was prepared, and in a single fluid movement she let fly with one of the heavy shoes. The shoe struck the face right between the eyes. There was a loud crash and a torrent of profanity from the street below.

Tina turned on the light, peered around her, and went timorously to the window. She peeped out—no difficult feat since her shoe had passed completely through the pane and apparently collided with the head of the policeman who was standing in cold-eyed fury directly below, kneading his skull and looking up. He fell silent the instant she appeared.

She realized much too late that he did so admiringly. There was plenty of light behind her.

A policeman! She'd soon find out how Brokaw was pulling this little stunt! She'd slap him in jail until he begged for mercy and the devil called him Granddad! She'd—

Her brain raced. She'd do what? Say to the officer: "There was a face floating in my room and I threw a shoe at it and it disappeared and I want you to throw Lee Brokaw in the clink."?

Oh, no.

She turned to her empty room and screamed, "I'll teach you to come home at this hour, you heel!"

"Lady," said the policeman, "talk to him more quietly or I'll have to take a hand in this."

"I'm so sorry, officer," she called down, and then even more loudly into the room, "now see what you've done!"

As she left the window she thought she could hear the policeman saying sadly, "The poor guy. I wouldn't be in his shoes."

The following morning she arrived at her shop a few minutes later than usual. Not only had she overslept but she had been

compelled to explain to the superintendent of her building that he had cleaned the windows so very clean that she had gone and stuck her silly head through one of the panes. She felt somewhat less than rested, and probably the least popular person in her cosmos was Lee Brokaw.

She opened the door, glanced around at her displays, and went back to the workroom. With grim deliberation she turned on the gooseneck lamp and the photocell, and settled down to work.

Then she saw what was inscribed on the black blotter to her right. It had apparently been written with the silver pencil which was bundled up with all the other colors at the back of the table. It said, simply, "Here I am."

It was written in a neat, possibly hurried hand, with fine lines and an even slant. It was almost a feminine handwriting.

"All right," she muttered. "Here I am, too." Tight-lipped, she picked up the blotter.

There was another blotter underneath it—a white blotter. On it, very much less than life-size, was the same face she had seen in her bedroom. It did not turn upside down. It simply faded slowly and disappeared.

Tina sat tensely watching the blank blotter, her hands achingly clasped. She sat like that until the blotter began to blur. Then she closed her eyes.

Aloud she asked herself, "Can I say it now, Tina? Can I, huh?" She nodded in reply. "Go ahead," she said to herself. "You'll feel better if you do." A pause. Then: "All right, I will. I'm really and truly scared, and I should never have listened to Eddy and I should never have gone to s-see that devil last night."

Tina realized suddenly that this couldn't go on. Either she got away from Lee Brokaw, Chelsea, New York itself—or she stayed. Going away was impossible from a business point of view and unthinkable from an ethical one. Then she must stay. But if she stayed, she couldn't just wait for something even more terrifying to happen. She had to smoke out the trouble. If things got worse, at least she'd know what she was up against. If things got better, well—that was what she wanted.

What to do, then?

Find Lee Brokaw, obviously, and get his story. Force him to talk even if she had to pound it out of him with a conch shell.

The chime sounded. She put her face back together and went

into the shop. "Eddy!" she exclaimed, and hope he wouldn't notice how close she was to tears.

"Hi, falutin'."

She forced herself to smile. "Lo, brow."

Eddy picked up an abalone shell and began toying with it absently. "How much were you kidding about that Lee Brokaw character last night?" he asked.

"Not a bit," she assured him.

"You said he was a vampire."

"*You* said he was," she reminded him. "All I really know is that he walked in here with some proposition that I couldn't let him finish, that he had a cigarette case which growled at me, and that he—"

"Go on."

"Nup."

He knew that monosyllable well enough to leave it alone. "Okay, let's take it as it comes. All you know is that he walked in here—*without* the photocell noticing him. He made you some offer which you insist wasn't what one would assume it to be, though you don't seem to know why."

"I just *know*," said Tina defensively. "Look, Eddy, if you think that Lee Brokaw is assuming the proportions of a deadly rival, you can think again."

"I'm not worried," said Eddy in an unconvincing voice.

"Eddy," she said thoughtfully, "what is so fascinating about Lee Brokaw just now? I've never seen you fret about anything like this before."

"I've never run across anything like this before," Eddy said. "I'll tell you what I know, Tina. Maybe a couple of things will clear up. Last night about half an hour before closing time, Shaw was in. You know him—manager of that smoke-hole where Brokaw has his act. He was in a fine froth. He wanted to know where Brokaw was. He stood up in a chair and yammered at the customers. Seems he had a second show in a few minutes and Brokaw was among the missing."

"Any luck?" Tina asked.

Eddy shook his head. "None of the customers seemed to know anything. I remembered what you said and called him over. He told me that he had hired a ham act and that Brokaw had come up with something that wowed the customers. He was afraid that

some competitor had bought him away, I think—though he pretended to be worried about the dear boy personally.

"I asked him what he knew about Brokaw—maybe we could locate the kind of place he might be found in. He didn't know a thing. Brokaw'd been in two days before and described his act and had done a short solo. Shaw never dreamed it was anything good."

Tina shuddered, "It was awful."

"Most of those acts are," said Eddy. "Anyway, I told him—what did you say? How do you know it was awful?"

"I saw it, Eddy."

"You saw—Didn't I tell you to keep away from there?"

"Yes, Eddy. You told me," she said, and her voice was altogether too gentle. "You didn't *ask* me, though."

"I didn't—Oh, I see. Little Miss Muscles can't be given orders, eh? All right, Tina. I'll stay out of your troubles. You can take care of yourself, and so forth. Only, when you're in up to your neck, don't—"

"I know, I know. I'm not to come yelling for you. Don't worry, I won't."

He went to the door. "I wasn't going to say that. I was going to say don't forget whom to yell for."

The chime sounded his departure. Not loudly, but with a faint tinkling sound that slowly died away into silence.

IV

She started after him, then stopped abruptly and dropped her arms. Why did men have to be so pig-headed? Why did every man who got interested in a girl appoint himself as braintrust, bodyguard, and duenna? Just to top it, the men who liked her invariably said they liked her because she was independent and self-sufficient. She compressed her lips and half-snorted, half-moaned in aggravation.

The moan was answered from the back of the shop.

Tina froze.

The moan was repeated. It was not so much a moan of pain, though pain was there. It was a moan of desolation—of utter hopelessness and despair.

Eddy was only a half-block away. Perhaps she should—on the other hand, Eddy was an egocentric, puffed up creature with a

dictator complex who wanted his women helpless. She'd investigate herself. She squared her shoulders and went into the back room.

There was nothing there but the moan. She looked under the settee and in the closet. Then she heard it again. It was outside, in the alley.

With some difficulty—the door was almost never used—she shot back the bolts and pulled it open. She looked to right and left. The noise was there again, faintly, almost behind her. She looked down a short flight of cellar steps. Near the bottom was Lee Brokaw.

“M-Mr. Brokaw?”

He started violently, staggered to his feet and shrank against the wall behind him. He was tattered and dirty, and his fine jaw was covered with harsh stubble. But none of this subtracted one whit from his incredible grace.

“You,” he breathed, and his voice was still the mellow tenor she had noticed before. But now it was faint and frightened.

“What’s the matter? Are you hurt?” she asked with alarm. “Come up out of there!”

“Will you take me inside where no one can see?”

“Come on. No one will see,” she promised.

He tiptoed up, crouching, his eyes on her face. They were full of eagerness and hope, and a terrible fear. *He dances every minute*, she thought.

Every single minute.

He flowed around her and into the open door like a feather borne on an eddy of wind. “Lock it,” he said, and while she complied he went to the partition and peered out.

“The chime will ring if anyone comes into the shop,” she said.

“Will it?” he asked, and smiled.

Remembering, she said, “Oh.” She pushed past him and sat at her work table. “Stretch out on the settee,” she said briskly. “I can see if anything comes in.” Why she said ‘anything’ instead of ‘anyone,’ she didn’t know. “Are you in trouble?”

He nodded, sinking gratefully back on the settee.

She stared at him. He looked so young, so tortured. The face was so different from the bland, cruelly smiling one she had seen in her room. But she could not deny it was the same face.

“I saw you last night,” she told him, on sudden impulse.

"I know you did," he said, putting his hand to his breast pocket. "I didn't see you, though."

"Oh—the cigarette case! I remember. You don't mean it growled because *I* was there?"

"It did." He took the case out and tossed it carelessly into her lap. She recoiled, staring at it. She was afraid to touch it, even to drop it. But she had to know. She gritted her teeth, lifted it, and said, "I'm going to open it."

"Go ahead," he said, as if he had much more important things on his mind.

She looked at him sharply. His eyes were closed, and a furrow of concentration was drawing together the inner ends of his brows. She drew a deep breath and—touched the clasp. The case sprang open.

Of all the things she expected to find in that case—the little crawling horrors, the amulets, the runes on parchment, even perhaps the electronic gear that had so cleverly made the growling sound—what she *least* expected to find in it was what it actually contained. The shock of it was almost more than she could stand.

What she felt was the utmost refinement of the feeling you have when, in a dream, you mount ten steps where only nine exist. True, there was a dragon there. It was etched on the inside of the lid, but it was no more ugly than those on the outside, and it even wore a smile. Otherwise the case held, of all things—cigarettes.

"This," she said, when she could at last say anything, "is positively the last straw. Lee Brokaw, who are you, and what makes you think you can frighten me? Why have you done things you must know I would refuse to believe—and bitterly resent."

He rested on one elbow and looked at her. Again his eyes were unfathomable. "I am a dancer," he said. "If you tell me what you think I have done, maybe I can explain. I want you, very desperately, to do something for me. I want you, because you're exactly suited to the task." He spread his hands, as if to say, "Could anything be simpler?" and lay back.

"What is this task?" she demanded.

"You mean—you'll do it?" There was sudden hope in his eyes. Tina shook her head. "I certainly said nothing of the sort."

"I can't tell you about it if there's any possibility of your *not*

doing it," he said.

"Well, then, drop dead or something," Tina flared. "I have a job!"

"You'll see me everywhere if you don't," he said. "At your home and at work."

"I've had a couple of samples of that," she replied acidly. "I could get used to it."

"It will get worse," he said, almost pleadingly, as if he did not want it to happen. "Other people will have my face when you speak to them. You will feel my hands on your face and your body. You will hear my voice when you listen to music, and later, you will hear it more and more until the whole world is filled with my voice and my face and my touch. You will go mad."

"I can keep you out," she said stoutly. "You can't walk through walls."

"Or through light-beams?"

Tina gulped. "I don't care what you do, or how much of it. You're crazy. I'm warning you now—there's nothing you can do to persuade me to do anything for you."

Arrara ...

"Oh, please," gasped Brokaw. He swung off the settee and came to her, sitting at her feet with his easy, drifting motion. He took her hands in his long, strong, slender ones, and turned his face up to her. It was changed now. His eyes were wide with terror, and the delicate lips worked.

His voice was a whisper, shrill with fright. "That was the last warning. It will be sometime today, or tonight. Please help me, Tina—please, *please*. Only you can help me ..." and he buried his face in her lap.

She looked down at his shivering shoulders, and thought of the calm strength he had radiated; thought of his symmetrical, unshakeable expression of objective power. Then her mind returned to the poor broken thing before her.

She stroked his sleek black hair. "You poor thing," she said. "I'll help you. You mustn't cry, Lee, you mustn't. I'll help you ..."

He sprang to his feet joyously, and grasped her shoulders. "You mean it, don't you? You really mean it?"

"My specialty," she said through a tight throat, "is sick kittens."

"You're an angel," he said hoarsely, and kissed her. It was a surprisingly gentle kiss, just between her left temple and her eye.

"Now sit down and pull yourself together, Lee. I've promised. You'd better tell me what this is all about."

"I killed a man," said Lee. Keeping his eyes on her face he moved backward and sank down on the settee. "I killed him when he was asleep. I hit him with a bronze book-end and then I opened the side of his neck with a little knife. His skin was tough," he added, "and the knife wasn't very sharp. It seemed to go on for hours."

"I see," said Tina, holding tight to herself. She began to force a smile but decided against it; her cheeks might crack. "And it left you with a psychic trauma."

"I suppose so," he said seriously, ignoring the weak attempt at facetiousness. "But that wouldn't be anything by itself. I'd be glad if that were all. But, you see, after I did it, I had to get away, and I couldn't. People knew me. I was one of those noticeable individuals, I suppose."

"You are."

"Am I? Well, it doesn't matter now. I'm not what I was then. I've changed. I sold my—my soul."

"What kind of mad talk is that?" said Tina, straightening in alarm.

"Go ahead. Take it for granted that I'm a psychopath. But you're going to help me, and you'll see. Don't you know that there are more forms of life on earth than the ones you read about in the biology books? You deal in shells. You know the shapes and forms they take. You know the differences in the substances shellfish feed on. You know the peculiar variations that occur. Do you know there's a shellfish in the Great Lakes that makes its shell—"

"—out of strontium carbonate instead of calcium carbonate. Of course I know. So far this is my lecture, not yours."

"Please listen," he said, "I don't know how much time I have ... There are creatures which feed exclusively on cellulose, and creatures which feed on the excreta of the cellulose-eaters."

"You've got termites there," said Tina. She was beginning to feel a little better. She knew enough about abnormal psychology to be able to pigeonhole some of this.

He ignored her. "There are creatures which eat granite, and lichens which live on them. But why go on? The world is full of this symbiosis, even in human beings. There are microbes living

in us without which we would die. And I tell you that there are creatures on earth which can't develop a soul any more than a termite can digest cellulose. These creatures feed on the souls which we humans build!"

"That's at least logical," said Tina. "Even if it happens to be untrue."

"We can no more understand them and their motives and methods and hungers than can the hungers, and dark biological urges of a bass be understood by the intestinal microbes of a minnow which it may have swallowed."

"Very clear reasoning," said Tina, hoping that her mental reservation did not show. "How do you know that such a creature wants to eat your soul?"

"I promised it," said Lee miserably. "You've heard the tales of selling your soul to the devil. They're poppycock, believe me. What I promised to give up, though, must be called a soul, because there is no other name for it. All those legends are true in essence. Heaven knows how many people lose their essence, their vitality—whatever you want to call it. These soul-eaters are psychic creatures. The psychic pressure of—you may call it the ethics, if you like—of a true promise, is binding. They give you what you want, in exchange for the promise of your soul."

"That's a little nonsensical," said Tina flatly. "If they had access to souls at all, why don't they just gobble them up and have done with it?"

"Do you," he asked, his voice too patient, "gobble up a steak in the butcher store? No. You carry it home. You store it for a while. You season it. You cook it—so much on this side, so much on the other. You serve it. Perhaps you add a touch of salt, or sauce, or tabasco. Only then do you eat it."

"And what, pray tell me, are these psychic sauces?"

"Emotions," he said. "Fear. Humor. Terror. Disgust. Pity."

"I see. And you're convinced that you are now basted for the last time and ready to take out of the oven?"

"If you want to put it that way," he said, unhappily.

"Don't mind my flippancy," she said with sudden gentleness.

"I know why you do it," he answered, understandingly.

"Now," she said, "tell me all about this thing, and skip the theory. You killed this fellow. I imagine you had reason for it."

"I had," he said briefly, with such terrible emphasis that she all

but tangibly felt the wave of hatred. "After I killed him, there was nothing I could do, no place I could go. I'd be seen leaving the house. I'd be remembered at the depot, at the airport. Sooner or later I'd be found.

"I was pacing back and forth in the library, trying to think of a way out, when I heard somebody cough. I was frightened out of my wits. There was a little man standing in the corner, smiling at me and rubbing his hands together. He looked perfectly ordinary. In fact, you see thousands of faces like that every day, and never remember them. The only thing unusual about him was his hair. He hadn't much, but, in that shadowy corner, it glowed.

"He told me not to be frightened. He said he knew what I had done, and the position I was in. He said he could help me. I believed him. I was desperate, frantic, ready to believe anything. He said that he could tell me just what I could do to get out of my trouble, and be free. He said I need never pay the legal penalty for what I had done."

Lee paused and moistened his lips. "I begged him to tell me. He played with me for a while, wanting to know how much I would give him. Finally I shrieked at him to tell me what he wanted. He told me. He gave me two years. *Two full years*. That looked like forever to me. I agreed. He got my solemn promise, and believe me, I was sincere. Then he taught me how to change."

Tina waited while Lee sat brooding. She realized that he was finished. "What sort of change?"

"I—don't want to tell you that. You wouldn't believe it. Nevertheless, I changed, and he kept his promise. I got away free, and came to New York. You know how I make my living. Of course, I don't push my luck. I think I could go to the top. I won't, though, unless I can live out the two years and beyond. I am morally certain if I can keep my—my—what it is he wants, I'll be safe from him and from the law for the rest of my life."

"Quite a tale," said Tina. "Now you'd better tell me how the silver cigarette case enters into it."

"I got it the night I promised," said Lee. "I—I can't seem to dance without it. I've tried, but without it I am no good at all. It seems to be just an ordinary cigarette case, but—"

"But indeed," shuddered Tina. "Still—I don't know. Lots of actors carry around a charm or a rabbit's foot. Tell me—what

about those fantastic threats you made a moment ago?"

"I'm glad I won't have to do any of those things," he said. "You see, when the Eaters feed, they do not take all of a person's essence. The body dies, of course, and what they want is eaten. But there is a good deal left over."

"Bones and suet, kind of," she said helpfully.

"Kind of." He smiled, but she could see it was an outward smile solely. "That remnant still has a life of its own. Much of it is ugly and evil. I imagine most 'haunts' are exactly those left-overs, drifting around the places where they used to live and, depending on their quality, clinging to places where something bad has happened, or to the places where they were happy."

"Hm. And which would I be, if you haunted me?"

"If you had refused to help me, it would have been bad. Bad."

"Okay, Lee. Now suppose we go back to my original question. What must I do?"

"It's very simple. Just go with me when the time comes. You may not know what a remarkable person you are. You positively radiate goodness, and courage, and humor. Perhaps I'm hypersensitive, done to a turn—" he smiled—"but I feel it vividly. I get it from you, and I think I re-radiate it. I think that if you were with me, with your wry wit and your psychic strength, and if I opened myself to you, I would prove distasteful to the Eater, and he would discard me."

"Burn the roast, hey? Too much salt in the cabbage? Is that all I have to do? Stay with you?"

"That's absolutely all. And in the good clean outdoors, too, right here in the city. At the corner of Bleecker and Commerce. No pentagrams, no witch's brew, no dark caverns. You heard the cigarette case a while ago. I have until ten o'clock."

"You want me to stay with you until then?" she asked.

"It won't be necessary," he assured her. "What time do you close?"

"On Tuesdays, about nine."

"Good. I'll drop by—"

"No," said Tina, suddenly thinking of Eddy Southworth and the big, strong, misunderstanding feet he would put into this if he knew about it. Eddy would have to be stalled off. "I'll meet you at the drug store at the corner."

"It's a date," he said.

He got quickly to his feet, looking younger than he should with his stubble and his hollow eyes, and went into the front of the shop. She followed him with deep concern in her eyes.

"Aren't you afraid of whatever it was you were hiding from?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I'm not afraid of anything any more, thanks to you." He opened the door, and stepped gallantly aside. Urged by reflex, she preceded him through. The chime hummed. She stood in the doorway as he slipped past her.

"I'm not going anywhere," she said. She realized only after he was gone that for the second time he had been in and out of the place without activating the chime. On both occasions she had just happened to be standing in the beam when he went out. She shrugged and went inside.

The store seemed unusually deserted, chill and spiritless, as though in departing he had stripped away its individuality.

V

"I think I can," said Eddy Southworth. He called to the pancake artist on the early shift. "Joe! Can you hang on a little longer? Tina wants to talk something over."

"For you, no," said Joe, flashing a large smile. "For Tina, yes. Take your time, Eddy."

Eddy steered her to a booth in the back. "What is it?" he asked.

She began her reply with an apology. "Eddy, hon, I'm sorry I barked at you this morning," she said. "But if there's anything I can't stand it's some good-hearted bumbling *man* being protective and laying down the law."

"All right, Tina. I'm sorry, too. But I happen to be fond of you—all of you, including your neck."

"My neck?"

"The thing you stick out."

"Oh, that. Well, you'll see that I am doing nothing of the kind. This Lee Brokaw business is coming to a head tonight, and I don't want you messing around with it. Now sit quietly and I'll tell you all about it from the very start. Maybe then you'll see it's all right and let me handle it my way."

"All right. I'm listening."

She told him everything, from the face in her bedroom up until Lee's departure that noon. Early in the account Eddy began to

sputter. She frowned at him until he stopped. Very soon afterward his jaw began to swing slackly. She stopped talking and aped him until he closed it. Finally she was through. It had been quite a recital, since her memory was good and her language vivid.

“And just what are you going to do?” Eddy demanded.

“Exactly what he asked me to do,” was her instant reply.

“But Tina!” Eddy protested. “You’re crazy! The man’s a confessed murderer!”

“Which would hold up in court only if supported by the evidence,” she told him. “And if there were any evidence, he’d have been caught. You know what passes for evidence nowadays. A trace of dust, a couple of hairs ... No, I don’t think there was any murder.”

“Then what about this fantastic business of the face in your bedroom, and the cigarette case, and all that?”

“Those faces I saw—well, I told you about his act, Eddy. Why don’t you jump to the conclusion that I’m a poor impressionable female when you have the chance? I’m quite convinced that I’m seeing things.”

“I must admit it sounds like it. But why must you concern yourself with this at all? You say that Brokaw doesn’t mean anything to you.”

“Every human being should mean something to us, Eddy. Lee’s a dancer—better than good. He’s great. He’s a very sensitive boy. He’s gotten a weird fixation, but fortunately there’s a very definite time limit on it. If my not being with him means that he goes off his rocker, perhaps permanently, I don’t want it on my conscience.”

Eddy looked at her with troubled eyes. “There is still one thing that troubles me. Why are you telling me all this?”

“Eddy, I’ve made my own way since I was a kid, and when I marry it’s going to be because the man I love and a girl named Tina are traveling together in the same direction at approximately the same speed, and each under his own power. I won’t be steered, towed, nor provided with an icebreaker. This business with Brokaw is for the record. It wouldn’t do any good to tell you about it afterward.”

He looked at her in awe. “Hi, tension,” he grinned. “That was a speech!”

"I'm just telling you, Eddy—if I see you at the corner of Bleecker and Commerce Streets at ten o'clock, so help me, I'll never see you again as long as I live."

"You won't," he promised. "It's a quarter to nine now. Will you drop back here around eleven?"

"Sure, Eddy."

"Tina—"

She waited.

"Good luck."

She smiled, put a kiss on her fingertips and brushed them across his mouth.

When she had gone, Eddy walked to the front. "Joe," he called.

"Huh."

"I'll give you five bucks if you hang on for a couple of hours."

"Nope."

"Ten, Joe. This is important."

"Nope. I'll do it for nuttin'. I know when a guy's got trouble."

"Gosh, Joe. You're a real pal. If there's ever anything I can—"

"Beat it," growled Joe. Eddy did, claspings, in his pocket, Tina's keycase, which he had filched from her purse.

VI

Tina and Lee Brokaw walked down Barrow Street. They had spent most of the past hour in a quiet bar and Lee still had not shaved. He was reserved and apparently in excellent control of himself. He spoke in monosyllables. As they turned into Commerce Street, Tina slipped her hand around his arm.

"Do you feel all right?" she asked.

"I feel fine," he assured her. But he was trembling, ever so slightly. He walked slowly, gazing ahead, his eyes flickering over the four corners of Commerce and Bleecker. There were a few people around, but apparently no one was waiting on the corner.

"Maybe he's late," murmured Tina.

"He won't be late," said Lee. He looked at his watch. "Four more minutes."

One and a half of the minutes were used up in reaching the corner. Tina felt as if she were carrying a bier.

"Did you hear about the nudist who went to the fancy dress ball with an egg-beater over his shoulder?" she asked.

"No," said Lee, smiling. "What was he masquerading as?"

"An outboard motor," said Tina, and added wildly, "that's the whole thing in a shellhole. My brain is certainly working on all fours tonight."

"Tina, Tina, hold on to yourself. I'll be all right. Just as soon—" He broke off with a sharp intake of breath. Before them stood a slender little man with a partially bald head and a very ordinary expression on his face, who looked from one to the other of them.

"Is this the girl you were talking about?" he asked mildly.

"Here she is," said Lee, and viciously shoved Tina forward.

"Lee!" she cried, utterly shocked.

The bald man put out a hand—to stop her, to catch her, to ward her off, she did not know. She twisted away from him, almost fell, staggered upright. Lee Brokaw was sprinting away down Commerce Street. She started after him.

Over her shoulder she saw the bald man coming after her, a bewildered and anxious expression on his mild little face. She put on a burst of speed, blessing her good sense in wearing ballet shoes, and for a brief moment gained on Brokaw.

"Lee!" she called.

Suddenly something big and black leaped out of a doorway and shouldered into Lee Brokaw. Caught in midstride, he caromed off into a lamp-post with bone-shaking force. The shadow caught him up, pinioning his arms behind his back and lifting him clear of the ground, bore him grimly along toward Tina.

Tina tried her best to stop, but skidded past. Brokaw, dangling in that relentless grip, lashed his body about, biting and spitting like a cat. Suddenly he began to scream—terrible, high-pitched screams.

The man carrying him said gruffly: "This is the one you want," and flung Brokaw down at the panting bald man's feet.

The bald man bent and grasped Lee's shoulder. Lee screamed again as if the hand were made of white-hot metal. He screamed twice more, writhing and twisting on the ground, and then lay still.

The big man said, "Tina, are you all right?"

"Eddy! Oh, Eddy, Eddy darling!" She flew into his arms like a bird into a large tree. He put his face in her hair. "I told you so, you idiot," he said, "and I promise not to say it again."

The bald man said hesitantly, "I have a warrant here for the arrest of a suspect in the case of Homer Sykes."

"Never heard of him," said Eddy.

"Take me home, Eddy."

"I'm very sorry," said the bald man. "You'll have to come with me."

Through the gathering crowd loomed a policeman. The little man rapped out instructions about a radio car and an ambulance. Another policeman rounded the corner. The man gave him orders about staying with Lee Brokaw until the ambulance arrived. Both policemen saluted.

"We can walk," said the bald man gently. "It's only just over the block. That man, by the way, is dead."

Tina and Eddy looked at each other. Eddy shrugged. "You're the doctor," he said to the bald man.

They went to the police station. There were a very friendly desk sergeant and three very sour policemen and a triply sour matron. They went to work on Tina with a great deal of efficiency. They took her fingerprints, but not Eddy's. They just asked Eddy questions about himself.

Finally they were told to sit there and wait. They sat. Tina got as close to Eddy as she could without unseating him and asked, "We murdered someone called Sykes?"

He patted her shoulder. "No, darling. It'll all come out all right. Shall I tell you a story?"

"Tell me a story."

"Once there was a big lug who liked a girl who got into some fantastic trouble. So while she went on into her trouble, he swiped her keys and went on a pilgrimage."

"Tell it straight," begged Tina.

"Okay. Well, maybe I'm just incapable of jumping to as many conclusions as you. I don't know. Anyway, Brokaw's photocell beam stunt bothered me. I kept thinking about it until I suddenly hit it. I bought a flashlight and went to your shop. I turned on the rig. I found that anyone who wants to look for the cell can see it, and the light-cowl across the doorway, too, for that matter.

"Now, if you want to pass a photocell without interrupting the light that goes into it, you shine a light into it, step through the beam, and take away your light. The poor photocell doesn't know the difference. Not a simple rig like what I built, anyway."

"I'll be darned."

"Then I don't know what you'll be when I tell you the rest of

this. Here.”

Eddy pulled something out of his pocket and dropped it into her palm. It was a ring of transparent plastic, slightly warped and sticky on one face. Around the edges were little curls of what looked like fused movie film.

“This little treasure,” he said, “was stuck to the bulb of your gooseneck lamp. Unless I am quite mistaken, it had a disc cut from a color photo transparency mounted in it. It was aimed at the black blotter. When you came in, you switched on the light, diddled around a minute and then sat down. The black blotter did not show anything up. The white one acted as a screen on which was projected a nice clear picture of your friend’s pretty face—until the heat of the bulb ruined it. I found jimmy-marks on the alley window.”

“But, why on earth should he—”

“Ask questions later. Listen. That projection deal woke me right up. I didn’t even have to go to your place. That show you threw—did you hit the face that was floating in your room?”

Tina nodded. “Right between the eyes.”

“Then what happened to the shoe?”

“It went straight out the win—oh!”

“Yes, *oh*. The face wasn’t in the room. It was on that tight meshlace curtain you have tacked over the lower pane.” He shrugged. “So, I went looking for some sort of a projector that could do a job like that. I went just down the street to the Mello Club. I got hold of Shaw, the manager. He’s a slimy little scut. I told him I had something hot on Lee Brokaw, but I’d have to check his dressing room to be sure.”

“Shaw didn’t like the idea much, but he’s so crazy to get a line on Brokaw that he’d give away his mother’s left leg if he had to. He showed me the place. He crabbed about the lock on the door. Brokaw had had it put on. It was quite a place. You should see those mannequin heads that Lee made. I went through the drawers, and found what I was after. I swiped it. Here.”

Out of the same capacious jacket came a specially built five-cell electric torch. Around the lens was a spring clip. “Here’s a whole set of slides. Colored ones, and this.” He handed her the glass disc. It was black, except for a spot in the center, which, when held up to the light, held a miniature transparency of Lee

Brokaw's almost beautiful face.

"They clip right on here like this," and Eddy snapped a black glass over the lens. "Brokaw just aimed that thing at your window, and then, probably, tossed a pebble or something at the glass. He held it until he saw your light go on. After that he could probably see you."

She blushed. "He probably could."

"Shaw told me something else. He's a low little scruff, as I said before. I just stood there looking thoughtful, and he volunteered the information that he actually had a periscope—can you imagine it?—from his office next door, so that he could keep a dirty eye on whoever was in the dressing room. And he found out something really choice about our friend, Lee Brokaw."

"What?"

"I think I'll wait and let the sergeant over there tell you. He's bound to come up with it before he lets us out of here."

"How on earth did you get that gadget out of Shaw's hands?"

"This searchlight thing? Oh, I just said something about the back room. Those joints always have a back room. He was very nice to me after that."

"Eddy! You might have gotten into some serious trouble!"

He laughed. "That—from you! Well, after that I hightailed it for Bleecker and Commerce, and hid in a nice dark doorway. I don't know what would have happened if Brokaw had run up the other street. There goes the desk phone. Listen."

The sergeant picked up the instrument briskly. "Speaking," he said. "Yeah, we've still got 'em. You don't say!" Then followed an infuriating series of grunted affirmatives while he wrote. Then, "Okay. Soon's I write it up. There may be a couple more questions." He hung up, and began to write.

"Master mind," said Tina while they waited, "can you tell me why Lee did all those things?"

"I can guess," said Eddy. He leaned back and caught his knee between his palms. "Lee Brokaw, for all his skill and sensitivity, was the victim of a very real delusion—that soul-eater business. You, my child, were a substitute."

"Me!"

"Yes, you. He saw in you courage and humor. He probably felt he had the same. Perhaps he did. But he needed some more

things that you had. The—what was it?—the seasonings. Fear, terror, disgust, pity. That's what he was conditioning you with."

"But how could he imagine that the soul-eater would mistake me for him?"

"For the same reason he thought the law would. He played it very cagily. That murder, now, was apparently a perfectly genuine one. He called up the police and tipped them off that the Sykes murderer would be at Bleecker and Commerce Streets at ten o'clock. I think he figured that the soul-eater, on seeing the surrender, would quickly jump at the first seasoned meat he saw that looked like the right one—rather than break his promise of keeping the murderer clear of the law. I imagine Brokaw was a little surprised to find only one person there—the detective."

"Unless that detective is also a soul-eater," said Tina brightly. "But Eddy, I still don't understand how he could dream that the soul-eater could make such a mistake."

"Sergeant," called Eddy, "could we be getting out of here soon? I'm supposed to be working."

"Oh, I guess so," said the sergeant cheerfully. "There don't seem to be much more to figure out now. It all ties up."

"Mind telling us why we were delayed?"

"I s'pose not, young feller. Seems like about two years back, this feller Sykes got married and killed the same night. They never did find the missus, and there wasn't a fingerprint in the place. It must have happened within an hour after they got to his place, and every fingerprint was wiped clean. Sykes had brought this girl from out of town. No one knew her. It was obvious she done it, but there wasn't but one clue as to who she was or anything about her. Even her license information was false."

"But there was one piece of evidence she didn't know about, or she'd have gotten to that, like as not. It seems Sykes sent a picture of her to his sister, and in the letter he said she had a great ugly mole on her back shaped like an angelfish. Well, now we know. She's been operatin' here for the past year and a half as an actor, ventriloquist, and dancer under the name of Lee Brokaw."

"Lee Brokaw is a *girl*?"

"Was, ma'am. Dead now. Coroner says she apparently died of fright when she was nabbed. What we held you for, young lady, is because you are the spit an' image of Mrs. Sykes, before she cut

and dyed her hair according to that picture. If it wasn't for that mole on Brokaw-Sykes' back, you'd have a time proving you didn't do it."

"He—he needed a shave!" she said desperately.

"Phony stubble, ma'am. Got it right here in the report."

"Mad, mad, crazy as a loon," murmured Tina as they went out. "The poor kid. How on earth did she ever dream up this soul-eaters thing?"

"Paranoid logic, I guess," said Eddy, who reads books. "A persecution complex and an absolute genius for rationalizing it."

They walked in silence for a block. "I'm glad," she said, "that that soul-eater's hypothesis is rationalized. That was a pretty convincing—*awk!*"

"What's the matter?"

"Someone in that doorway," she shuddered.

It was dark there, but there seemed to be something ... he pulled out Brokaw's flashlight and switched it on.

It gave a peculiar, dim light. Standing in the doorway was a mild-looking little man, almost bald. He was looking at them and rubbing his hands.

His fringe of hair glowed a ghostly green.

"On your way, I see," said the little detective happily. "A most unpleasant experience." He came closer. Tina shrunk away from him.

"Mind if I ask you," said Eddy faintly. "D-do you use vaseline in your hair?"

The man touched it. "Why yes. Why?"

"Ha ha, good stuff, hey?" said Eddy, and, scooping up Tina, he all but galloped away.

"It's all right, Tina," he said as they hurried. "It's perfectly all right. I still had that black disc on the flashlight. It's an ultra-violet filter. Vaseline fluoresces just fine under ultra-violet."

What he did not tell her, and what he sincerely hoped she would never find out, was that vaseline fluoresces blue, not green.

Story Notes

by Paul Williams

“Cactus Dance”: first published in *Luke Short’s Western*, October 1954. Written sometime before June 1953, when Sturgeon sent a copy of the finished manuscript to fanzine editor Redd Boggs. In the essay “Why So Much Syzygy?” which Boggs published that year, Sturgeon described *the different components of love, sexual and asexual* as he’d written about them in different stories. In “Cactus Dance” (upcoming in Zane Grey’s Western), he wrote, *it is non-physical, perhaps even non-substitute physical love, as represented in several symbiotic relationships between humans and yucca plants.*

This was the third “western” story by TS; the first two appeared in *Zane Grey’s Western Magazine* in 1949. This is the only one that can be considered to have a fantasy or science fiction element.

The portrayal in this story of the peyotl cactus as a conscious being that can somehow inhabit or share consciousness with a human child is similar to Carlos Castaneda’s account in his 1968 book *The Teachings of Don Juan* of being told by his Yaqui Indian mentor that the dog that played with him after he ingested peyote was actually Mescalito (peyote) itself playing with him. Professor Grantham’s account in “Cactus Dance” of a trial where witnesses testified *about how peyotl-eaters quit drinking, went back to their wives, and began to work hard* is an interesting precursor of defenses of psychedelic drugs frequently articulated in America in the 1960s. In 1965 Sturgeon went through intensive LSD therapy sessions under the supervision of a psychotherapist. As far as I know, that was his only experience with psychedelic drugs.

The paragraphs near the end of the story in which Grantham talks about a man who *went away to a river island to carve statues* were apparently omitted from “Cactus Dance” in its original magazine appearance and so have not been included in this story when previously published in Sturgeon collections (*Aliens 4* and *Sturgeon’s West*). They are in the original manuscript found

among Sturgeon's papers, and have been restored here by my choice. The restored paragraphs begin *I said nothing* and end *I understood that, and had nothing to say*.

"The Golden Helix": first published in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, Summer 1954. Written in autumn 1953, when Sturgeon apparently submitted it to *Astounding Science Fiction*, edited by John W. Campbell, Jr. On Nov. 23, 1953, Campbell wrote in a letter to Sturgeon: "Dear Ted—No can use, I'm afraid. The thesis has point, but the thing won't work this way. The Golden Helix is perfectly valid—but you see the counter-current of the helix exists simultaneously with the direct current. Your helix is actually a Moebian [sic] strip, which has only one side, and only one edge, and feeds on itself. There is *both* increasing complexity *and* increasing simplicity, and the two currents progress simultaneously. The trouble with Viridis is that it causes the a retrogression of both currents. That's not the way to do it. We can live only by going back to simplicity, and starting again—but it's done via the ovum and the sperm. And while the physical form is very simple, the philosophical formulation of the fertile ovum is far more complex than that of the adult human being! ... The Golden Helix is valid—but not in quite the form you've got it here."

Introducing this story in his 1979 collection *The Golden Helix*, Sturgeon wrote: *Far more remarkable, to me, than any other aspect of the intricate plot of this story is the fact that it was written in 1953, a good span of years before the double spiral of the DNA molecule was discovered, with its astonishing role in evolutionary structures. This makes the story a sort of quasi-mystical precognition—something I was not and could not be aware of when I wrote it. This is by no means the only time this has happened. Well after the fact, readers have unearthed in my work devices, events, or phenomena that I couldn't possibly have known of at the time I wrote them: Velcro, illuminated watch-dials, certain breakthroughs in cancer research, automobile smog devices, and a good many other things. The average gap between these appearances in my typewriter and the emergence of them in the real world seems to be about fifteen years. I claim no special superiority for this, and admit to a good deal of humility. There are times when I feel like no more than a length of pipe, through which Something pours these things into my manuscripts.*

As it happens, Watson and Crick first published their double helix theory of DNA in 1953. It's fair to assume that the notion came to TS independently and almost simultaneously ... and that he wasn't aware of their work when he wrote this story.

In section IV, when Tod recalls *an old, old tale ... from the ancient Amerenglish, by Hynlen (Henlyne, was it? no matter)*, the story he's referring to is "Goldfish Bowl" by Robert A. Heinlein, which appeared in *Astounding Science-Fiction* in 1941.

Later in section IV, *They called the moons Wynken, Blynken, and Nod* is a reference to Eugene Field's well-known late-19th-century children's poem, "Dutch Lullaby": "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod one night sailed off in a wooden shoe ... All night long their nets they threw to the stars in the twinkling foam; then down from the skies came the wooden shoe, bringing the fishermen home."

David Pringle wrote in his introduction to the 1987 collection *A Touch of Sturgeon*: "What are the 'obsessive' themes that make this author's stories so interesting? The most frequently remarked is the theme of union—of meeting, melding, and becoming one. This takes various forms: love-and-togetherness, human-and-alien syzygy, the 'bleshing' of a *gestalt* consciousness (as in 'Baby Is Three') or a racial hive-mind (as in 'To Marry Medusa'). Such unions are usually portrayed as highly desirable events, kinds of salvation, like the cosmic vision which concludes 'The Golden Helix.' "

When this story with its many births and children and children-of-children was written, Theodore Sturgeon's son Robin was a year old and his wife Marion was pregnant with their second child, Tandy.

"Extrapolation": first published in *Fantastic Stories*, April 1954, under the title "Beware the Fury." Editor's blurb from the first page of the original magazine appearance: MEET WOLF REGER—TRAITOR. COMPARED TO HIM BENEDICT ARNOLD WAS A NATIONAL HERO AND JUDAS ISCARIOT A PARAGON OF VIRTUE. AT LEAST THAT'S THE WAY IT SHOWED IN THE MAJOR'S NOTES ... BUT TRAITORS AREN'T BORN THAT WAY. SOMETHING HAS TO HAPPEN TO THEM LONG BEFORE THEY TURN AGAINST SOCIETY. THAT'S WHY, WHEN YOU DIG DEEP ENOUGH, YOU MAY FIND THAT THE WORD *TRAITOR* CAN BE ONE HELL OF A MISNOMER ...

When Sturgeon included this story in his 1964 collection *Sturgeon in Orbit*, he called it “Extrapolation,” apparently his original (manuscript) title. The story-introductions TS wrote for that collection have as their theme the magazine editors who first published the stories and his relationship with them. In his introduction to “Extrapolation,” he wrote: *This might be called a “forgotten” story in the sense that it has, through the years, been overlooked by anthologists and yet (I have it on good authority) is one of my major works. I know that when I unearthed it for this volume and read it, I put it down with (incredibly) real tears in my eyes. I let Groff Conklin (now there’s a good editor) see it, and he confessed it had him weeping aloud. It was Howard Browne who bought this story, and I suddenly recall the circumstances, because it was the only time such a thing ever happened to me. I came in with it and said, “Look, Howard, I’d appreciate it if you could let me know on this sort of soon because—” He interrupted me: “You in a bind? Wait a minute.” He reached for the phone and said “Accounting Department?” Then to me, “How long is it?” I told him. Howard looked up at the ceiling for a moment, calculating, and then said into the phone, “Send up a check for Theodore Sturgeon for a story called Extrapolation for (he named a figure).” “But Howard!” I cried, “you haven’t read it yet!” He shrugged his Kodiak-bear shoulders. “I don’t need to and you know it.” They don’t hardly make ’em like that no more.*

“Granny Won’t Knit”: first published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, May 1954. Written winter 1954.

In his introduction to “Granny Won’t Knit” in the 1979 collection *The Stars Are the Styx*, Sturgeon wrote: *This story had, for me, a most unusual nascence. Usually my stories emerge from hidden convolutions of my gut—my very own personal gut. In this case, a time arrived when Horace Gold, having saved space for me in an upcoming issue, called to ask, as politely as possible, “Where the hell is the novelette?” and I answered with perfect truth that although my gut was in perfect operation, it hadn’t taken that certain turn just yet. So he put me on hold, and called another writer with whom he had discussed an idea, but who had later said he had decided to do nothing with it, and asked him if he would mind his passing the idea over to Sturgeon. The writer said go right ahead; he’d never do anything with it himself. The basic idea was this matter transmission thing. So I wrote Granny, hardly getting up from the typewriter, at*

about the time the other writer changed his mind and wrote The Stars My Destination. I do indeed love Granny, but I wish I'd written the superb novel Alfred Bester did.

Editor's blurb from the first page of the original magazine appearance: WHEN PRIMLY STARCHED BOY MET UNPRIM AND UNSTARCHED GIRL, IT WAS REVOLT AT FIRST SIGHT, FOR GRANNY DIDN'T KNIT—SHE WOVE!

The speech and behavior of the authoritarian father in this story are clearly derived from Sturgeon's childhood experiences with his stepfather, as described in his autobiographical essay "Argyll."

"To Here and the Easel": first published in *Star Short Novels*, a book edited by Frederik Pohl and published by Ballantine Books in September 1954. In an appreciation published in the July 1985 *Science Fiction Chronicle*, publisher Ian Ballantine recalled: "... Ted was now ready to take on commissions. Having been brought up in Woodstock, New York, I had an interest in the artistic creative process. I asked Ted for a short novel that gave the reader insight into the creative process. Ted wrote 'To Here and the Easel,' published in *Star Short Novels*, edited by Fred Pohl."

In an essay in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, September 1962, science fiction author James Blish described this as his "favorite Sturgeon story." In the version of this essay included in *More Issues at Hand*, a 1970 collection of Blish's sf criticism, published under the pseudonym William Atheling, Jr., Blish wrote: "All of Sturgeon's major work is about love, sexual love emphatically included.... Directly under this heading belongs Sturgeon's love affair with the English language, which has been as complicated, stormy and rewarding as any affair he has ever written about. He is a born experimenter, capable of the most outrageous excesses in search of precision and poetry; people who do not like puns, for example, are likely to find much Sturgeon text almost as offensive as late Joyce (and I am sorry for them). Nobody else in our microcosm could possibly have produced such a stylistic explosion as 'To Here and the Easel,' a novella based in language as well as in theme on Ariosto's 16th-Century epic *Orlando Furioso*, because in fact nobody else would have seen that the subject couldn't have been handled any other way." *Orlando*

Furioso, an epic poem by Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto, was published in 1516; *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature* says it is "considered the finest expression of the artistic tendencies and spiritual attributes of the Italian Renaissance."

Damon Knight, science fiction author and critic, in his book *In Search of Wonder*, said: " 'To Here and the Easel' was written at the very top of Sturgeon's range, on the same level as *More Than Human* and 'Saucer of Loneliness' and a few others—a breathtaking display of sustained brilliance, all glitter and pop, never holding still an instant, with the velvet-covered fist hanging, hanging ... here a pun with a bawdier one on top of it, here a sudden unexpected gallop of blank verse ... until that damned fist comes down and squeezes the whole thing so tight that there's nothing more to say about it."

No reader of "To Here and the Easel" will be surprised to learn that around the time he wrote this story Sturgeon was himself suffering from a bout of "writer's block" comparable to the "painter's block" suffered by its protagonist. On June 2, 1955, Sturgeon wrote to Anthony Boucher: *I've been terrified for a long time now. A year ago April I dried up, and though I've done four or five shorts since, they were hard and squeezed out with the sensation of working out a vein; every word closer to the last I could ever do. In June [1954] I accepted a very large advance from Dell and found I couldn't write the book it was for, not a word of it.* Sturgeon in his 1962 Guest of Honor speech at a science fiction convention referred to this same time period by saying, *I went into a terrible dry spell one time. It was a desperate dry spell and an awful lot depended on me getting writing again.* In another letter to Boucher, Feb. 4, 1956, he said, *Fact is I've been battling my Beast, the paralysis of the typewriter which has beset me often on for the past fifteen years but ever so much worse in the last three. I still haven't identified this monster, but I've made this much progress: I know when it's working on me. That's small progress, but it's something.*

TS included "To Here and the Easel" in a 1971 collection called *Sturgeon Is Alive and Well ...* which was otherwise completely dedicated to eleven stories he wrote in the summer of 1969, suddenly ending another dry spell as the result of the arrival in his life of a female admirer of his work who traveled 6,500 miles with the intent of meeting him and encouraging him to write. In his foreword to that collection, he wrote, *I was living at the bottom*

of a mountain in Neverneverland, far under a rock ... unaware of just how far I had crawled and how immobile my crouch. Suddenly one day there exploded a great mass of red hair attached to a laughing face. Her name was Wina ... She crawled way in under that rock and hauled me out. (She became the mother of his seventh child, Andros.)

“When You’re Smiling”: first published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, January 1955. Editor’s blurb from the first page of the original magazine appearance: YOU’VE NEVER READ SCIENCE FICTION LIKE THIS BEFORE. IT’S A SHOCK WAVE OF TERROR—WITH A JOLTING, BLINDING CONCLUSION. IT’S STURGEON!

Introducing this story in his 1979 collection *The Stars Are the Styx*, Sturgeon wrote: *It must be apparent by this time that I tend to write about nice guys. But I also believe (as you will discover later on) that I believe in the yin and the yang, and that from time to time one must turn the coin over and investigate what lives under the sun-warmed rock. I also believe that although ultimate justice will be done (even if only statistically, even if later than sooner), it is, as often as not, done for selfish reasons and benefits the universe by accident.*

“When You’re Smiling” is the title of a song recorded by Louis Armstrong in 1929.

Among the “maundering” pages (efforts to develop story ideas) found among Sturgeon’s papers is one that suggests Sturgeon may have had the opening page or two of this story long before he wrote the rest of it or knew where it was going. The maundering page says: *Use that Henry copy—my God, it’s the start of something. Whoy! There’s the good seed of a regeneration story in it, implicit in the News feature writer.* Another page includes these lines: *So we meet Henry again. His key is empathy—loads of it, more of it than he needs or should have. Somehow I have to introduce this other character, the man with no empathy at all... I feel that once I get him and Henry together I’ll charge right ahead.* Another page, that possibly precedes the writing of *that Henry copy*, contains some of the story’s elements but with the personalities of the characters seemingly reversed: *If Henry is happy with things as they are, who better to elucidate the virtues of our method? He would rush to the e-t as to a vacuum, this e-t suffering, as he does, a torture from excess empathy; Henry’s joy derives from real egocentricity, turned on its head and looking like altruism. So start off with reminiscences of*

school and what a happy underdog Henry was, and meet him again years later; go from joy to disgust and finally lash out at him....

To me, one remarkable aspect of “When You’re Smiling” is its powerful portrayal, in the form of a first-person narrative, of the modern archetype described in Alan Harrington’s 1972 book *Psychopaths* and William and Joan McCord’s 1964 book *The Psychopath*. Harrington’s book begins: “‘There walk among us men and women who are in but not of our world,’ wrote the late Robert Lindner. ‘Often the sign by which they betray themselves is crime, crime of an explosive, impulsive, reckless type. Sometimes the sign is ruthlessness in dealing with others socially, even commercially.’” Charles Manson is one of the examples Harrington cites. A significant passage in “When You’re Smiling” (referred to by Sturgeon as “the empathy story” in his maunderings before he wrote it) is this monologue: “*I’m different, Henry. I’ve always known I was different.*” I poked my finger toward him and he curled from its imaginary touch. “*You, for example—you have, like nobody else I ever met, that stuff called ‘empathy.’ ... Now me, I have as much of that as my armadillo-cat has fur. It’s just not in me. I have other things instead. Do you know I was never angry in my life? That’s why I have so much fun. That’s why I can push people around. I can make anybody do anything, just because I always have myself under control ... You’ve seen me operate. You going to call a man like me human?*”

William Atheling, Jr., in *The Issue at Hand* (1964), wrote: “‘When You’re Smiling’ is a hate-piece, but it is never out of the author’s control for so long as three words. Ted’s portrait of the man who enjoys causing pain is that of a man who thoroughly deserves the author’s loathing. But by taking the pains to tell the story from that man’s point of view, and to convey some of the man’s enthusiasm for himself and his researches, Ted has made sure that his evil character does not emerge as an unbelievable caricature. The deeply subjective approach unfolds on the page with an air of pure objectivity, as though the author were simply presenting the character as he is, with an invitation to the reader to pass his own judgment; the author is loading the dice, to be sure, but entirely below the level of the reader’s attention.”

“Bulkhead”: first published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, March 1955, under the title “Who?” Editor’s blurb from the first page of

the original magazine appearance: NO MAN COULD MAKE THE LONG HAUL ALONE AND SO THERE HAD TO BE SOMEBODY BEHIND THE BULKHEAD—BUT THE ENORMOUSLY IMPORTANT QUESTION WAS: WHO?

In a 1979 collection of three stories called *Maturity*, TS wrote in the book's introduction: "*Bulkhead*" was written in 1954, and appeared in Horace Gold's *Galaxy*. A few months before I wrote it I ran across a statement by Philip Van Doren Stern: "Never set pen to paper until you can state your theme in one single, simple declarative sentence." This really intrigued me, and I began to look for it in every story I read. Well, it is not as simple as it seems, nor so obvious. I found few of these 'single, simple declarative statements' anywhere. So I began to look for them in my own writings, and couldn't find them there either. But about a year and a half after "*Bulkhead*" appeared in print, I reread it, and I found that theme in the simplest words. Can you? The discovery qualified this story for this book: a further advance in understanding the nature of maturity. I'll tell you this in the postscript. In the book's postscript, TS wrote: A single, simple declarative statement: A man doesn't grow up until he can come to terms with his early self.

The text of this story as it appears in Judith Merrill's widely read anthologies *SF: The Year's Greatest Science-Fiction and Fantasy* and *SF: The Best of the Best* is different from the text of this story in Sturgeon's own collections *A Way Home* (1955) and *Maturity* (1979). This is because the Merrill books reprint the story as it ran in *Galaxy*. Uncharacteristically, Sturgeon provided the publisher of *A Way Home* with the carbon of his original manuscript of this story rather than a copy of the published story, possibly because he was not happy with H.L. Gold's editing of the story for *Galaxy*, but probably also because the book (which was published in May 1955) went into production before a copy of the printed magazine was available. The Theodore Sturgeon papers in the Dept. of Special Collections, Spencer Library, University of Kansas, include Sturgeon's original manuscript for "*Bulkhead*" as line-edited by Gold and sent to *Galaxy*'s printer. An examination of this "setting copy" shows that Gold, for example, changed the opening words of the story's third paragraph from *Which, of course, eliminates* to *Naturally, that eliminates* and added the sentence *You have a shipmate, but even so, you're alone.* after the opening sentence of the fifth paragraph (*Then there's this:*

You're alone.). In the *Galaxy* text, in this same paragraph, in the sentence that begins *Psychodynamics has come a long way*, Gold cut the following phrases: *it hasn't begun to alter the fact that human beings are the most feral, vicious, destructive, and self-destructive creatures God ever made*. Close examination of the Spencer Library's copy of the (marked-up by Gold) original manuscript further reveals that Sturgeon did make some small changes of his own (possibly in response to suggestions from the book's copy editor) to the story before *A Way Home* went to press.

In her introduction to "Bulkhead" in the first volume of her annual *Year's Best* anthologies, Judith Merrill called Sturgeon "The Man With The Golden Pen; for my money, the top writer among established 'names' in sf." She notes that the U.S. Air Force is currently (1956) studying a problem central to "Bulkhead" and another story in her anthology: "They call it 'Space Medicine'; their object is to make certain that human minds and bodies will be able to survive the Big Jump, when we make it."

The reference late in the story to *Dell's hypothesis (promulgated 'way back in the 1960's by a lay analyst named Dudley Dell, who was, as I remember, the editor of a love-story magazine)* is an in-joke. H. L. Gold had used the pseudonym Dudley Dell on occasional features he wrote in *Galaxy*. And Gold was certainly prone to articulating his own psychological theories in conversations with and letters to Sturgeon and other *Galaxy* writers. In the original manuscript of the story and as it appeared in *Galaxy*, Dell's hypothesis was *formulated way back in the middle of the 20th century by Dudley Dell, which was one of the pseudonyms of a magazine editor. As I remember it, he later became a lay analyst and—*

On one sheet of the "maunderings" in which Sturgeon typed notes to himself exploring story ideas, he seems to arrive at the idea of reviving his unpublished 1947 story "Hurricane Trio" by interpolating a science fictional element. He did this, and the story was published in *Galaxy* in the April 1955 issue, and included in his 1955 collection *A Way Home*. At the bottom of this sheet, after an asterisk, the following note appears:

Coexistence of older-younger entities in a person: psychiatric treatment separates entities which would otherwise be in conflict, so that a man has company on a space trip. He doesn't know, of course,

that he's talking to himself, and the similarity-conflict factor will be just ideal to keep him alert. Title: BULKHEAD. denouement when he's shown the bulkhead, the too-small-for-a-passenger space behind it, then the psych snaps fingers and commands him to remember—his own memory—some preoccupation of the junior member.

It is of course quite unusual, and just the sort of stunt that Sturgeon would undertake and succeed at, for a story to be written entirely in a second person narrative voice (“You’re alone. You crouch in this little cell in the nose of your ship”). It is possible that this aspect of this story had a significant influence on Rod Serling’s use of a similar narrative technique on many scripts for his popular television series “Twilight Zone.”

The protagonist’s ruminations *Nobody but a cadet deserves a ship!... Why did you hold still for Base routines, for the hazing you got from the upper classmen?* derive partly from Sturgeon’s experiences at age seventeen on a school ship, the Penn State Nautical School, which included being “brutalized and beat up” (he told me in 1976) along with other new cadets in routine hazings conducted by upper classmen.

“The Riddle of Ragnarok”: first published in *Fantastic Universe*, June 1955. Editor’s blurb from the first page of the original magazine appearance: IT WAS A WORLD OF GIANTS AND OF WOMEN WHOSE LIMBS WERE MAGIC—AND FABULOUSLY STRANGE WERE THE WEAVING STRANDS OF ITS DESTINY. Also on this page was another editorial note, which said: “Theodore Sturgeon, who recently won the International Fantasy Committee Award for the most distinguished SF novel of the year, is probably the most versatile of the scant dozen writers who have compelled the moulders of our literary climate to take science fiction seriously as an important branch of imaginative fiction. We are happy to welcome him to our pages for the first time with this glowingly fanciful saga of a realm enchanted.”

The details of the events in this unusual Sturgeon story seem to be consistent with the story of the death of Balder or Baldur as it is often told in Norse mythology—particularly as recounted circa 1225 in the *Prose Edda* by Icelandic poet and historian Snorri Sturluson (Saxo’s Danish account differs)—with the exception of the twist of Loki’s possible innocence and the non-weeping giantess as a figure other than Loki in disguise. These elements

and the remarkable conversations (and ultimate reconciliation) between Memory and Thought appear to be Sturgeon's inventions. (*A Guide to the Gods* by Richard Carlyon, 1981, and *Encyclopedia of Gods* by Michael Jordan, 1993, were helpful to me in this determination.)

“Twink”: first published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, August 1955.

In his 1984 collection *Alien Cargo*, Sturgeon said of “Twink”: *This is the one and only time I used this particular writer's trick in narrative. I wonder if you can divine what it is. Otherwise, I must express pride at the insightful look at society's insensitivities toward the unusual person. The disabled are unusual; special gifts are unusual; too many people don't know the difference. The slow learners are unusual; psychopaths are unusual; too many people think they're suffering from the same thing. These, among other things, are what this story's about, so I hope you will forgive the trickery.*

Editor's blurb above the title in the original magazine appearance: IT WAS BAD ENOUGH BEING TREATED LIKE A FREAK—NOW THERE WAS THE HORROR OF WHAT I HAD DONE TO ...

“Bright Segment”: first published in *Caviar*, an anthology of short stories by Theodore Sturgeon published by Ballantine Books in October 1955.

In his 1984 collection *Alien Cargo*, Sturgeon said of “Bright Segment”: *Surely one of the most powerful stories I have ever written. This was made into a 58-minute TV film in France, with Gert (Goldfinger) Frobe cast as the old man, and doing an extraordinary piece of acting. Further, the French shot it almost exactly the way I wrote it, and I wrote it despairing that it could not be filmed; American TV could never (1955) handle that much blood and that much skin. I wish you could see it. I own the only print in North America, but can't use it for admission or release it to net or cable. I can, however, use it as a lecture resource: a three-hour performance during which I read the story up to but not including the ending; challenge the students (creative writing, scripting, directing, cinematography, what have you) to suggest what they would include or change or eliminate if this were their film; then I show the film, read my ending, and launch a Q&A. It takes about three hours, and it*

costs, but I understand it's worth the nut. The French director is Christian de Chalonge; he's unavailable at this writing, but he seems to be, so far, the only one in the industry anywhere who really understands what I am all about. He's also unavailable at this writing. 'Sway, as Lady Jayne says; it means, "That's the way things are." There is, by the way, no important language difficulty; you will see as you read it that it's about 92% visual—virtually without dialogue, by its very nature.

The film was first aired on French television in 1974, under the title *Parcelle Brillante*.

David Pringle in *A Touch of Sturgeon* (1987) calls "Bright Segment" "a disturbing variant on the Esmeralda and Quasimodo story [in Victor Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*]."

The similarity between the basic situation of this story and the way Wolf Reger and his wife met in "Extrapolation" suggests that when Sturgeon was asked to write a new piece of fiction for inclusion in his forthcoming Ballantine collection, he took the opportunity to explore a story-idea that had been with him since he wrote "Extrapolation," but that he hadn't pursued until now because it wasn't science fiction or fantasy and so none of the magazine markets he'd been selling to would be able to use it. It is interesting to note that although there is no science fiction element here, the form of the story arises from one of the premises that are most often used in developing a science fiction plot: What would happen if ...? Certainly the powerful portrait of the pathos of the human need to be needed that results is unmistakably a "Sturgeon story," regardless of what other genre it can or cannot be placed in.

"So Near the Darkness": first published in *Fantastic Universe*, November 1955. Editor's blurb from the first page of the original magazine appearance: BROKAW'S GUILT AND FEAR SEEMED MORE THAN HUMAN FLESH COULD ENDURE. BUT TINA COULD SEE THE UGLY BRIDGE-WORK BEHIND THE DARK ONE'S FANGS. The second editorial note read: "It was Theodore Sturgeon's genius for combining fantasy with science fiction, in a blend of enchantment rare in our age, which won him an International Fantasy Committee Award in a year which saw an unprecedented display of competitive brilliance on library shelves. We doubt, indeed, if there is another writer of quite his

stature in *both* genres. And now, for the second time, he appears in our pages with a tale as darkly terrifying and as fraught with Novembrall direfulness as midnight's frightful liaison with a demon moon."

Tina's "colorful little shop" where this story begins is located in the same neighborhood as the store in Sturgeon's 1940 story "Shottle Bop"—Manhattan between the Chelsea District and Greenwich Village, where Sturgeon lived in 1940 and 1946.

The possible existence of powerful "psychic creatures" who are nourished by human souls and emotions and experiences is a recurrent Sturgeon theme (cf. "The Perfect Host," 1948; "The Dark Room," 1953; "Ghost of a Chance," 1943).

"Clockwise": first published in *Calling All Boys*, August-September 1946. *Calling All Boys* was a monthly magazine published by the publishers of *Parents' Magazine*. It included color comics along with articles and stories. "Clockwise" ran on one page of the magazine, illustrated by a drawing captioned, "Jemmy stood there, sweat pouring off him, still turning the first screw." The editorial blurb atop the story read: WHICH WAY DOES A CLOCK HAND TURN? JEMMY DIDN'T KNOW. BACK IN THE HILLS HERE HE LIVED, THERE WERE NO CLOCKS.

Sturgeon had lived in Jamaica in 1941 and in the next few years did construction work for airbases in the West Indies.

"Smoke!": first published in *Calling All Boys*, December-January 1947.

For more than seven years your editor and other Sturgeon appreciators have been searching the Library of Congress and university library collections for copies of *Calling All Boys* magazine that might contain these two "missing" Sturgeon stories. They have finally been found and are included here thanks to the tireless efforts of Sturgeon scholar William F. Seabrook.

Editorial blurb atop the story: "BAIL OUT! DON'T BE CRAZY!" AN INNER VOICE KEPT SHOUTING AT HANK CORSON AS THE MONOPLANE FILLED WITH DENSE SMOKE.

This story is a retelling of "Watch My Smoke," one of Sturgeon's first published stories, circulated by the McLure

Syndicate in March 1939. See the story notes in the first volume of this series for Sturgeon's recollections of being very impressed by the bush pilots of the Canadian lake country when he visited there at age sixteen.

The previous two stories are included out of chronological sequence (of composition) in this series because no copies of them could be found when the 1946 volume (*Thunder and Roses*) was being prepared.

If this series were in perfect chronological sequence (not possible for a variety of reasons), Sturgeon's short novel "The [Widget], the [Wadget], and Boff" would appear in this present volume just before or after "When You're Smiling," as it was apparently written in autumn 1954 (based on comments by Sturgeon in a letter sent to Anthony Boucher on May 11, 1955 when he submitted the short novel to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, which published it in two parts in its November and December 1955 issues). The story could not be included in this book for length reasons, but appears in *Slow Sculpture*, Volume XII of The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon.

Clockwise

"THIS IS A GOOD JOB if I say so myself," said Sam Cobb, holding up the carburetor float he had just soldered. He and his sidekick Jack Delaney were working on Sam's jalopy.

"Looks okay," said Jack, straightening up from his valve grinding. "Say, isn't that your brother Henry coming up the drive?"

"Yep! Oh boy! I'm glad you're going to get the chance to meet him, Jack. He's a swell guy." He went to the garage doors and waved, and watched his brother approach. Henry Cobb was a stocky man, a construction engineer, just returned from an airbase job in the West Indies.

"How's with the puddle-jumper?" he asked.

"Fine. Come on in, Henry." They went into the garage, and after introductions, spent a slightly greasy half-hour going over the battered old car. Then Henry wiped his hands with a gas-soaked rag.

"Does me good to see you kids doing a job like this," he said. "I don't think there's anywhere else in the world where you'll see youngsters your age doing this kind of thing." He laughed. "I remember a kid I ran into in Jamaica. Name of Jemmy. Came from back in the bush, up in the hills where bananas grow wild and the houses are made of packed-earth and palm leaves. He was a waterboy, and wanted to be a mechanic the worst way.

"Well, I gave him a break, finally—he wore me down. I had a plywood facing I wanted screwed on to a wooden soldering table. I drilled his guide-holes for him and gave him a screwdriver and some screws, and told him to go ahead. Half kidding, I said, 'You know which way to turn screws, don't you? Same way a clock goes.' He said, 'Yas, bahss,' and started for the bench.

"I came back in about twenty minutes—and there he was, sweat pouring off him, still working away at the first screw! I watched him for a minute, and do you know what he was doing? Turning the screw *back and forth* in the hole—half a turn in, half a turn out! I asked him what in blazes he was doing. He replied in

that peculiar Jamaican dialect, ‘Ah, bahss, him cyan’t go in, sah. Ah turn lak yo’say, sah, but him cyan’t go in!’ He looked as if he’d burst into tears. Well, I questioned him, and it turned out he couldn’t read or write—or tell time. He’d only seen a clock a couple times before—didn’t know *which* way the hands went. But he had seen a clock taken apart once, and inside there was a little thing that went back and forth, back and forth; and for him, that was the way a clock went!”

The boys roared with laughter. Sam said, “Gosh! Those people sure must be dumb down there.”

“Now wait a minute,” said Henry quietly. Sam saw that the smile had disappeared from his face. “Did you say dumb? Think a minute. What’s the main difference between you and Jemmy? Hm? You’re American, white, and educated. He was Jamaican, black, and illiterate. Now, be fair. Under the same circumstances, would you be as smart as he was? Sure, I thought it was funny; but I didn’t think he was dumb. I saw right away that he was using his eyes and his brains—and carrying out orders the best way he knew how.

“No, Sam; the big difference between you and Jemmy is the difference in *opportunity*—that and no more. You have had it, and Jemmy never had it. If it weren’t for that opportunity, we’d never have turned out thousands of pilots and radio men and mechanics to win the kind of war we had to fight. And we’d probably be asking some *Gestapo* guy for our daily bread, instead of overhauling a swell old tomato-can like this one.”

“Gosh, Henry, I never thought of it like that.” Sam thought for a moment. “How did Jemmy make out?”

“I hired him. Know what he did with his opportunity? He was foreman of that shop by the time I left the island!”

Smoke!

HANK CORSON'S NARROW NOSTRILS had been twitching for some minutes before he realized that it was smoke he was smelling. The tiny cockpit was filling with a dense, acrid smoke. And that was bad!

Hank knew his ship. He should—he and his brother Jim had built it. It was strictly backyard stuff—a high-wing monoplane, doped fabric over spruce spars and a venerable, in-line four cylinder gasper that dragged it over the sky. But it flew. And its aluminum floats made a runway of any fair-sized puddle in the Canadian lake country. The plane wasn't much to look at, but it moved small freight often enough and fast enough to make a business. Some day he and Jim would be running swift, sleek flying boxcars, and scheduled feeder flights. Lodestars, maybe, or DC-3's.

"... getting worse," muttered Hank, sneezing as the smoke filled his nostrils. He wiped his eyes and squinted at the board. Manifold pressure, oil pressure, okay. Charging, fuel, fine. Altitude three thousand. The motor thrummed on, smooth as ever. No, if there was a fire, it was back here somewhere, and not in the engine compartment.

The cargo?

He squirmed around and peered back into the fuselage. Those diesel injectors wouldn't be burning. The V-belts for the Horne Mines' wood shop? No they were rubberoid and the smoke didn't smell like rubber. Could the heating pipes have set fire to something? He frowned. He had no time for detective work. He had to get out of here in a hurry.

He sneezed again and slipped one arm, then the other, through the shoulder straps of his chute, brought the rest of the harness up from between his legs, and clipped them all together at his chest with the snaffle hook. Now he was ready to jump.

A touch on stick and pedal, and he was in a steep bank, circling, peering over the coaming at the country below. Foothills—burned-over land, a leafless forest of blackened trunks and ravelled, riotous undergrowth. It was maybe fifty-five miles by air

back to Kiskeard, and the back-country lake where he based his crate. About forty to Lac du Chat Noir, where his cargo was consigned. Nothing between the two but scrub and rocks. Nothing to eat unless he could knock out a rabbit or a chipmunk. A long haul.

He shrugged. That was better than what this smoke promised him. He'd have to jump!

A sunbeam slanted into and through the cockpit as he circled. In it was the ghost of a fern-frond, curled and feathery, all made of blue smoke. He stared at it while it dispersed, and then swore bitterly. This was fine. This was just dandy. Nothing insured but the cargo. They'd just spent their last dollar on war-surplus radio equipment, stuff they would still be using when they got the Lodestars ... Now there wouldn't be any Lodestars, no Corson Brothers Air Freight. They couldn't finance another plane. They had a swell radio. They'd have to sit and listen to orders from the mines all through this district, and hear other charter airlines getting the jobs. No plane, no business!

Hank growled and punched viciously at the controls, snapping the fragile plane back on the Lac du Chat Noir course. The smoke seemed to be increasing slowly ... If only he knew where it was coming from. What was burning?

Once when he was a kid he had helped his father burn out wasps from their nests under the eaves. They had waved a burning rag on the end of a long stick under the nests, and the wasps flew into the ragged yellow flame. There would be a little puff of fire as their wing caught, and then they would drop. This would be the same. The seaplane would explode into flame all at once, all over.

Maybe that would be good. Maybe that would be better than what he would see in Jim's eyes when he trudged up out of the bush, late tomorrow. Jim would be glad to see him alive all right. Yeah, and then they could go back to working for someone else, scrabbling for pennies to start up again, while their competitors clinched all the business.

Breath rasped in Hank's throat. He coughed and tried to spit, but his mouth was too dry. It was getting tough to see the controls. *Get out! Get out!* something screamed inside his head. In the war, you could bail out of a burning ship and they'd hand you another one ...

In a desperate surge he yanked the little extinguisher from its clips under the board, turned the handle and pumped it, aiming back into the empennage. Nothing happened. The air got worse, and the smoke got even thicker, that was all.

The thing in his head screamed at him again, "*Get out!*" He opened his eyes. He was flying with a wing down. He straightened her up, and the effort made him realize that his mind was wandering. He shook himself, leaned over and peered down.

A lake!

He throttled down and pressed the stick away from him. If he could ... but that lake! *That* lake! He recognized it—Bouche du Diable, the Canucks called it. Shaped like a smiling mouth, fanged with sharp, white, pyritic quartz, shallow, narrow, and surrounded by wooded hills. No one had ever set a plane down on Bouche du Diable.

"*Get out!*" ... This was foolish. He could jump. So he lost the business. That was better than losing his life!

But knowing he should jump did not keep him from slipping down toward the little lake. It would be crosswind. He'd tear the floats off her. He'd tangle with the trees. He'd—

When the left float clipped a treetop, ever so swiftly and gently, he knew he had lost his chance to jump. Too low! He snarled like an animal and snatched his arms out of the chute harness. He wanted to call himself something, but he couldn't think of a name for a man as dumb as he was. He could have jumped! And now—

Well, now he was too busy to think. He cut his gun, fishtailing wildly, snapped on the ignition again just before the motor stopped, to rev up, haul up her nose, stall in. The plane screamed and fluttered down to the water, one float low, to splash and sit like a tired duck, while every frame and member yelled for help. She yawed and dipped a wingtip, but she came back. And before she had stopped moving, Hank had swept aside the cowling and was out on the float, leaning back to scrabble around in the cockpit behind the seat.

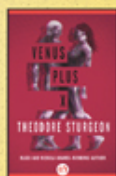
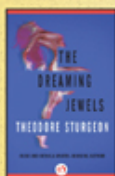
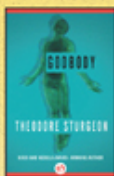
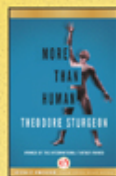
He found it, flaming now, and he hauled it up and out of the seat and dropped it into the lake. And then he clung there, croaking, his big shoulders shaking. Not crying. Laughing.

He hadn't jumped. And there it was, blackened and bubbling, sinking through the clear water—the thing that had been burning

all along—his parachute!

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